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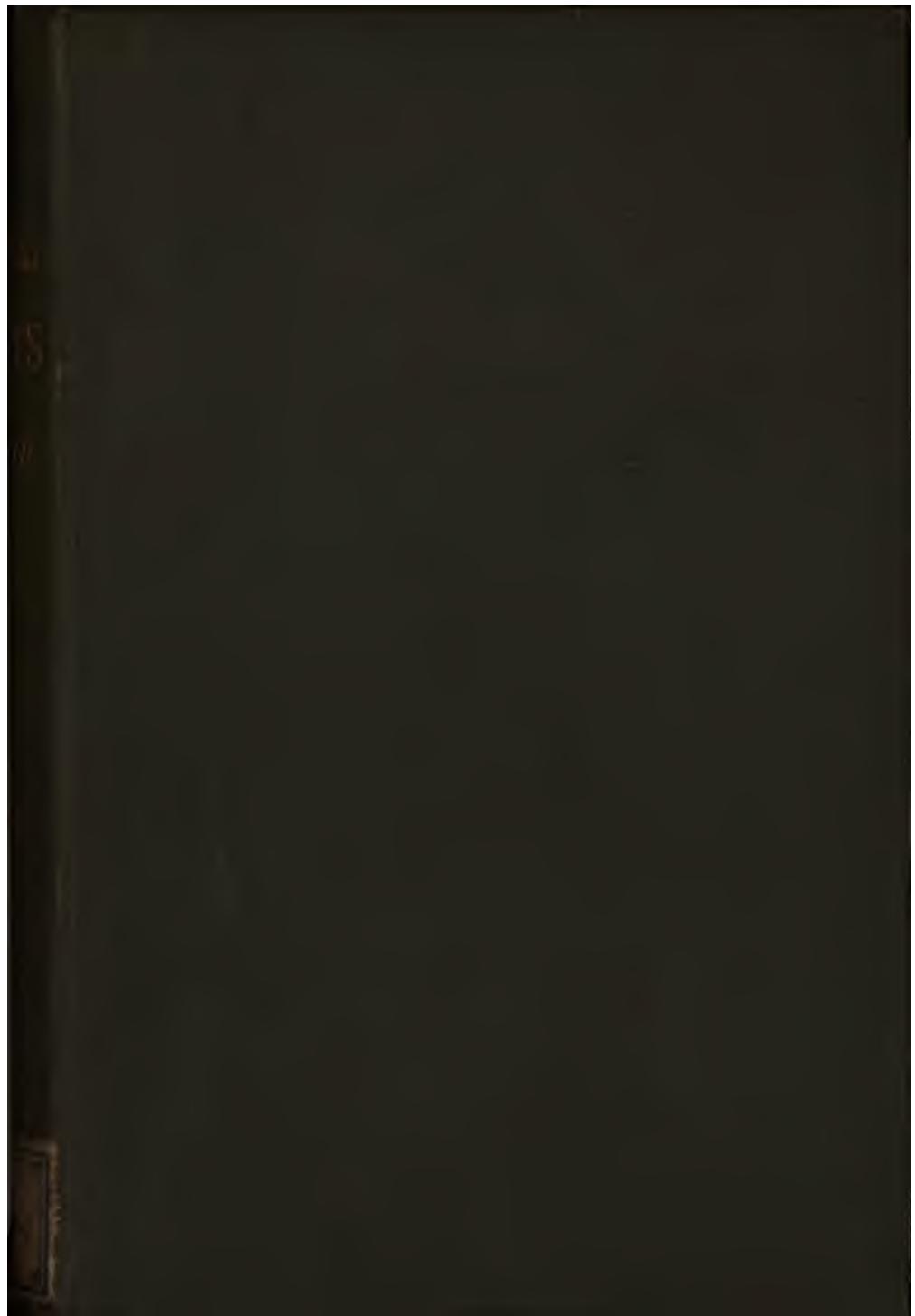
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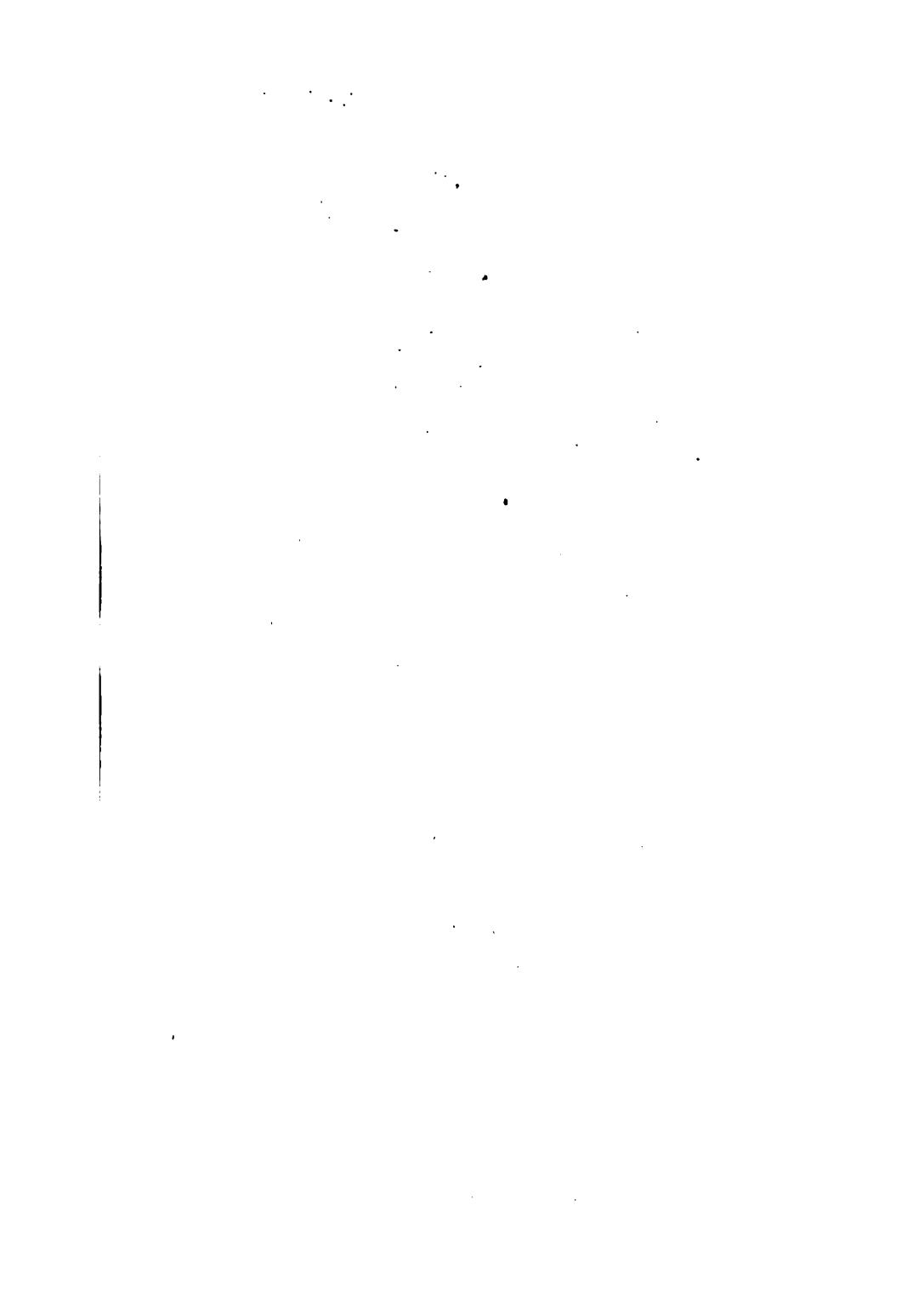


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# LOYAL HEARTS.

A Novel.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

DOROTHEA M. CORBOULD.

“Once as he watched his rose love,  
Winds from the North did blow,  
Swept him out of the casement  
Into a stream below.  
True to his little lady  
Still he shouldered his gun,  
Soon, ah soon, came the darkness,  
Life and love undone.”

MOLLOY’s “LITTLE TIN SOLDIER.”

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VOL. II.

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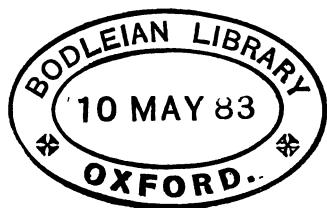
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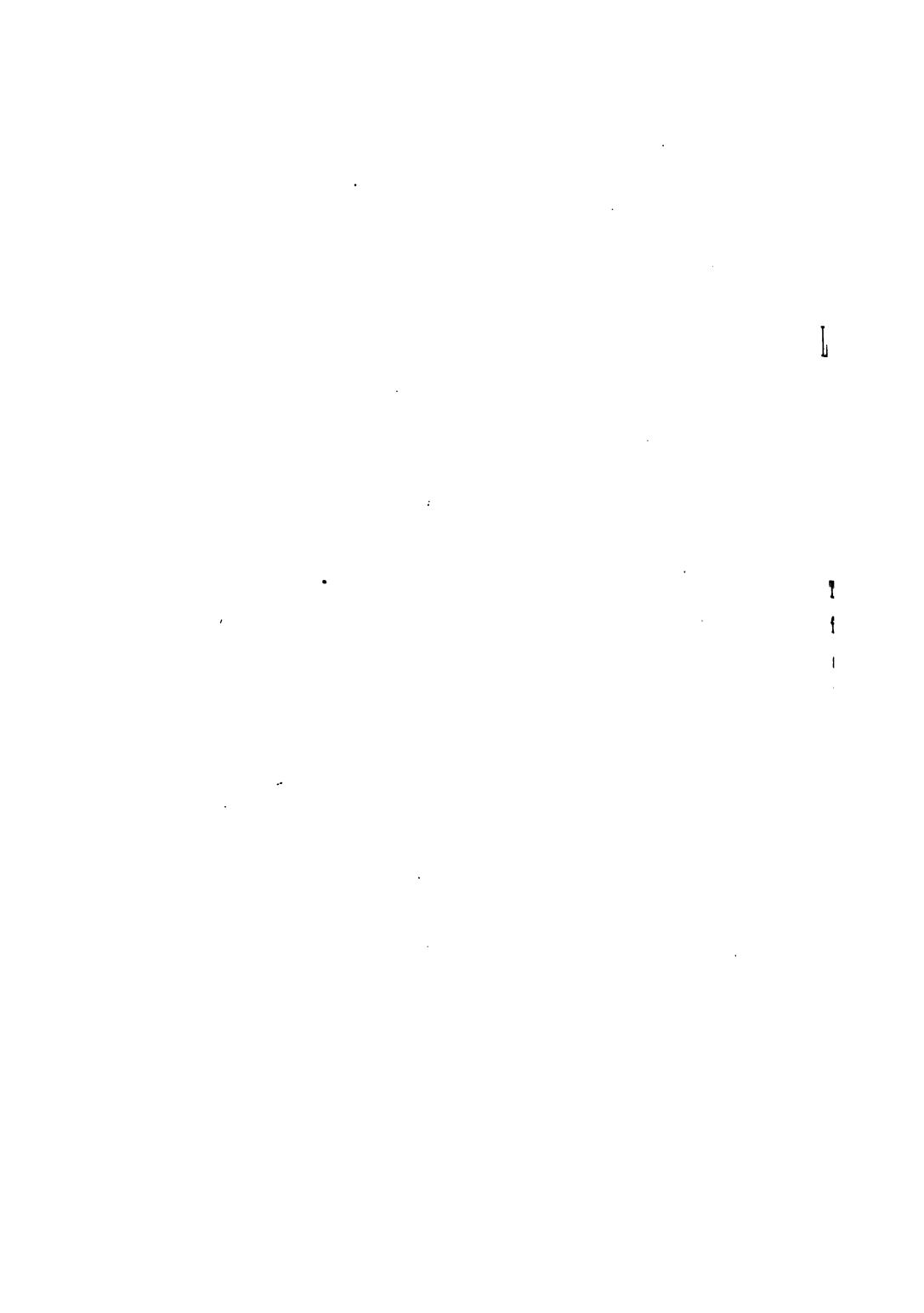
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# LOYAL HEARTS.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THERE ARE CLERGY AND CLERGY.

THE Reverend Hugh Cunmore walked up to the front door at Abbott's Home, and rang the bell somewhat impatiently. His face, which, by-the-by, was a handsome one enough, dark, and possessing finely-formed features, looked now considerably perplexed; and he tapped his umbrella thoughtfully upon the stone step while waiting the answer to his hasty summons.

“Is Mrs. Mervyn at home?”

Thomas, as he answered in the affirmative, looked askance at the young curate as though he would have liked to add, “But I wouldn't advise you to see her,” for the servants at Abbott's Home were of opinion that to keep clear of scrapes and fault-finding upon those days of the week when their

mistress's face bore the storm signal, they must beware of venturing into the threatening vicinity ; and already this morning several members of the household had come under the range of the fast-gathering tempest—Thomas himself among the number.

Mrs. Mervyn sat in the morning-room, busily engaged at her writing table. Her face wore its most forbidding aspect, and the hand which she extended in greeting to Mr. Cunmore was more limp than usual, while her voice sounded ominously polite and calm.

“ I sent for you, Mr. Cunmore, to ask your kind help and assistance in a most disagreeable matter which has lately come under my notice,” she began, taking her seat at the table, and motioning her visitor to a chair opposite ; “ a most disagreeable matter, and one in which, I think, the clergyman of the parish the most proper person to interfere.” Here Mrs. Mervyn paused, and Mr Cunmore bowed. “ Miss Dufferin ”—the young clergyman started and looked keenly at the speaker ; but Mrs. Mervyn, though she witnessed the start, and privately made a note of it, pro-

ceeded calmly with her speech—"Miss Dufferin quite agrees with me that it will be for the greater satisfaction of all parties if this mystery be sifted to the bottom, and, if possible, cleared up."

Again Mrs. Mervyn paused, and appeared absorbed in contemplating the brilliants in her ring, which she was twisting round and round upon her finger.

"You may rely upon my doing my best to aid you in the matter," answered Mr. Cunmore, more and more puzzled by her words, and wondering what could be the cause of her writing the mysterious letter which he had received, asking him to come at once and consult with her upon a most important subject, concerning which she must implore that he did not speak before any member of her family but herself; and of her seeming unwillingness to come to the point now that he had obeyed her summons.

"Thank you, Mr. Cunmore."

Mrs. Mervyn ceased her contemplation of the sparkling jewels on her finger and raised her eyes, fixing them full upon the handsome face of her visitor.

"I have your promise not to mention this to any one?"

"Certainly."

Mrs. Mervyn rose from her seat, and going to her escritoire, took therefrom a letter, which she handed to Mr. Cunmore with the words—

"Read that, and give me your opinion upon its contents."

The young clergyman, still looking mystified, took the missive in silence and began its perusal, closely watched as he did so by the lady opposite him. The letter began with a sort of apology on the writer's part to Mrs. Mervyn for troubling her again upon the subject of her daughters' dress and conduct in general, and after a series of abusive and impertinent remarks, wound up with a caution to avoid further scandal by descending from the position in which she was so palpably out of place, and returning to the simpler habits and inferior life of a farmer's wife. "You think you have married one daughter well," ran the letter, "but before long you will find out your mistake. And now you are seeking as good a match for your second daughter, but she will outwit you, for she is

a sensible girl in spite of your teaching, and will choose the position intended for her by Providence."

The letter bore no signature. Mr. Cunmore, with a perplexed look on his face, read it to the end; then, without a word, passed it back to its owner.

"Well," said Mrs. Mervyn, hastily.

"It is a disguised hand," began the Curate, musingly.

"Yes, yes, of course; I know that. But now the thing is, who wrote it?"

Mrs. Mervyn's tones were pettish; the frown upon her brow had deepened.

"This is not the first anonymous letter I have had, Mr. Cunmore, and I am going to have it put a stop to. Now, the clergy of the parish are, I consider, the proper persons to do this; and I have sent for you to ask you to help me in my endeavours to find out these people and punish them. But I have not told either my husband or children of these letters, neither do I intend to at present. This was why I asked you not to mention the matter before them."

Mrs. Mervyn paused, as though expecting her visitor to say something.

“Do you suspect any one?” asked Mr. Cunmore, wishing he were well out of the matter.

“Yes, that is it. I am certain I know who wrote both the letters—it was the Leslies!”

Mr. Cunmore started from his seat.

“My dear Mrs. Mervyn! Not the ladies at the Abbey?” he said excitedly.

“The ladies at the Abbey,” coldly. “Either they wrote it or Miss Bottomly, she”—

“I should be much more inclined to suspect Miss Bottomly than the Miss Leslies. Think, Mrs. Mervyn, of the vulgarity of which you accuse them when you hint at such a thing. Now, I am sorry to say, Mary Bottomly’s conduct of late has been anything but lady-like.”

“What has she been doing?”

Mrs. Mervyn drew her chair a little closer to Mr. Cunmore’s, placing her hands together on the table, and prepared to listen to a piece of scandal, a pastime in which her soul delighted.

“Oh — nothing particular.” Mr. Cunmore hesitated; he did not know if it would be safe to

confide in Mrs. Mervyn. Then, seeing gathering wrath and disappointment on that lady's expressive countenance, he went on—"Miss Leslie wrote to Mr. Ashby the other day to say her sisters wished to resign their places in the Guild ; you know they joined with your daughters a short time ago." Mrs. Mervyn made a sign in the affirmative. "Well, Mr. Ashby was, of course much surprised, and sent me to ask the reason ; and then Miss Leslie told me that she did not consider Miss Bottomly a fit person for her sisters to associate with ; that if they came in contact with her they must, of course, be civil, and upon such civility Miss Bottomly presumed on all occasions."

"Ah, so I have heard," Mrs. Mervyn said, musingly.

"It is much more likely that a feeling of jealousy, or some fancied slight on the part of your daughters, should have caused her to write you these anonymous letters, in order to cause you annoyance and possible discomfiture."

Mr. Cunmore rose and stood upon the hearth-rug ; his earnest, kindly face more earnest still,

Mrs. Mervyn, watching him, was struck for the first time with his good looks.

"If the Leslies are not continuing in the Guild neither shall my girls," she said decisively; "and I have always objected to Janet singing in the choir. I shall not let Auriol and Mildred join when they leave school; and I am sure it would be better if Janet resigned. I shall tell Mr. Ashby so."

Mr. Cunmore looked disturbed.

"What have I done?" he said, dubiously. "In trying to defend the Miss Leslies I have been blackening another person's character, and have lost two members out of our choir; for I suppose"—hesitating a little—"Miss Dufferin will resign to?"

"That I cannot say; Miss Dufferin is her own mistress in such matters. I shall tell her *my* opinion; she can act as she thinks best."

Well Mr. Cunmore knew that whatever she thought, Miss Dufferin would not remain in the choir after Miss Mervyn left."

"Then will you write to Mr. Ashby?" he asked.

"Perhaps it would be the best plan, then he

can act as he sees fit. He ought, of course, to turn Miss Bottomly out of the choir and Guild; a poor girl would not have been allowed to remain a member for one instant if she were the subject of half the ill-natured remarks which Miss Bottomly has drawn upon herself," Mrs. Mervyn wound up wrathfully.

"Well, I advised Mr. Ashby to ask her to resign some time ago, but he said he could not afford to lose a good voice for the sake of *example*; and he is so dreadfully absent. I daresay he has forgotten all about it by this time. Perhaps, now that your daughter withdraws, he may see things in a different light," Mr. Cunmore said, thoughtfully.

"I cannot think what freak of fortune made Mr. Ashby a clergyman! He is no more fitted for the post than—than *I* am! I suppose *you* do all the work in his parish, don't you?"

Mr. Cunmore laughed.

"He certainly is a queer man; wrapped up in his books, with not an idea beyond them and his sick wife, poor thing!" he said pityingly.

"That poor sick wife of his covers a multitude

of sins. Only the other day, when I was speaking of him to a friend of mine, she said, 'Oh dear, Mrs. Mervyn, we *must* make excuses for the poor man ; think of his sick wife !' I do think of her very often, and pity her ; but I don't see that all his ill-tempers and absence of mind should be laid to her charge."

"Nor do I. Mrs. Ashby is the most gentle and lovable woman I ever met !" Mr. Cunmore exclaimed, enthusiastically.

"So I should think. Well, Mr. Cunmore, then I will write to Mr. Ashby and tell him of this letter, and ask him to speak to Mary Bottomly ; and in the meantime you will try and aid me in my search for the delinquent ? "

"Certainly, with pleasure. But I must tell you, to begin with, that I fear you will not move the Vicar to anything like energy in the matter ; he is not like the general run of clergymen—takes no interest in his parish or church."

"Well, I suppose there are clergy and clergy," Mrs. Mervyn said, with something like a smile as she bade farewell to her visitor.

"I wonder which part of them Mr. Ashby belongs to?" he said, laughing. Then he turned away, and took his departure.

Hardly had Mrs. Mervyn seated herself at her writing table again, when the door opened, and Janet appeared. Her face was paler even than usual, and there were dark circles round the hazel eyes. She closed the door and advanced as far as the table. There she stood waiting."

"Well, dear ; what is it ? "

Mrs. Mervyn's face wore an absent look, for she was deep in the concoction of a severe and deeply injured epistle, to be despatched as soon as possible to Mr. Ashby.

"I wish to speak to you, mamma ; are you busy ? "

Janet's voice was cold and stern ; her small shapely head haughtily erect.

" If you can wait a minute I shall be glad, for I want to send this letter ; it is nothing very important, I suppose ? Doesn't your new tennis dress fit well ? "

" It is not of dress I wish to speak to you,

"mamma," Janet answered, in the same cold, unmoved tones; "and, though it is important, I can wait."

Mrs. Mervyn's pen once more moved over the paper, but somehow her ideas did not travel as quickly as before; her sarcastic sentences did not come so readily. Altogether the latter part of her letter was a failure. She felt it; but how could she write with Janet looking daggers at her opposite?

"Don't stand there fidgeting so, Janet; how can I write? Get something to do dear, pray, till I am ready," she said crossly.

Miss Mervyn left off playing a tattoo on the table, and taking up a book, sank down in the nearest chair and began to read.

Silence followed, while Mrs. Mervyn altered, erased, and finally wrote her letter over again. Then she sealed and directed it, and rising from her seat, rang the bell.

"Give this to Payne, and tell him to take it at once to the Vicarage," she said, as Thomas presented himself, a guilty look on his face, for the bell had surprised him in a game of marbles with

Payne in the stable-yard. Then as the man, with a relieved face, retired noiselessly from the room, Mrs. Mervyn turned to her daughter. "Now, Janet, for your 'particular' business."

She said it with an attempt at jocoseness and a suspicion of a smile, but there was no answering smile on Janet's face. She closed her book, laid it aside on the table, and rising from her seat, confronted her mother.

"Mamma, what did papa say to John Raynor?"

Mrs. Mervyn was startled; the abruptness of the question took her completely by surprise. How much did her daughter know of the interview between herself and the young man, which took place so secretly three days ago?

"Why do you wish to know?" she asked coldly.

"Because I think I have been unfairly treated in the matter. Papa had no business to—to send him away without saying a word to me about it; and I *must* know what he said."

Janet's cheeks were flushed now; her tones excited. Mrs. Mervyn took refuge in sternness.

"Janet, I think you are forgetting your position

as my daughter. *Must*, indeed ! And pray what has Mr. Raynor told you himself on the subject?"

"Nothing ; he simply said in his note, you can read it"—laying it upon the table—"that papa had refused his suit, and that he was going away," a little catch in her breath came with the words.

Mrs. Mervyn took the letter, a supercilious smile curling her lips as she read it.

"I do not think he ought to have written to you at all," she said, when she had finished ; "it was a breach of confidence."

"And do you mean to say, mamma, that you think I should have gone on day after day, knowing that he had been here to speak to papa, without being told the result of the interview ? I should have written to *him* if he had not written to *me*," drawing up her head proudly.

"Indeed, Janet ; I hope you would have done nothing of the kind. You are not engaged to him ?"

Mrs. Mervyn looked keenly at her daughter as she spoke.

"He asked me to be his wife, and I accepted him," was the calm reply.

“Janet ! How *dare* you tell me such a thing ? But you will not marry him—your father and I are firm on that point. A girl in *your* position, with the prospect before you of making as good a match as your sister, throw yourself away upon a *vulgar*”—

“Stay, mamma.” Janet’s tone was haughtily commanding—not the tone of a daughter to her mother certainly ; but anger against that mother had banished all reverence from the girl’s sore, aching heart—she thought only of her banished lover. “ You may scold *me* as much as you like ; but of him, the man I love, you shall not utter one word of censure or contempt. And I tell you now, mother, that some day you will regret having refused us both what would have made the happiness of our lives ; for I have made a vow, a solemn vow, never to marry anybody but John Raynor, and I *love* him ! Oh, Jack ! Jack ! ”

She hid her face in her hands, and burst into tears. Mrs. Mervyn looked annoyed and perplexed.

“Janet, this is utter folly.”

Janet raised her head, the old proud look coming into the soft hazel eyes. She lifted her pocket-

handkerchief to her face, then stood erect, unyielding as before.

“I have said that your father and I totally disapprove of your engagement to Mr. Raynor. We intend to give you the advantage of a London season, as we gave Gwendoline. Your aunt is expecting you at Lancaster Gate the first week in March. Till then I do not consider you are at liberty to think for yourself at all; and, indeed, you seem to forget that until you are of age, *I* am the proper person to direct your actions. You will see in London, men who, in comparison with John Raynor, are kings and princes. You will, therefore, wait till then for a decision upon your future. By that time your very unlady-like infatuation for this young farmer will, I trust, have passed away.”

Mrs. Mervyn paused. Janet stood looking at her in haughty silence.

“Have you anything more to say to me?” coldly.

“Nothing—there is not anything to say,” Janet replied.

“That is well. Remember I will have no more letters pass between you and John Raynor.

Neither will I have his name spoken in this house; he has abused the confidence your father and I placed in him, and"—

"Mother! he has done nothing of the kind! How was he to know that you would refuse to let him marry me? He is a gentleman, rich, and—and *everything*," wound up Janet, at a loss for words.

"His worldly position has nothing to do with it," Mrs. Mervyn returned, speaking once more in her coldly sarcastic tones. "You are not going to marry the first rustic swain who asks you, I suppose? John Raynor's parents were quite common people. It is all your father's fault for having him here so often; I always said he would presume upon it," crossly.

Janet did not answer. She stood regarding her mother with a somewhat curious expression, then she said abruptly—

"Mother, when Gwen married an earl, did you suppose she would be happy?"

"Of course; why not?" somewhat uneasily.

"Because I didn't. And I know if you asked her now, she would tell you that she would give it

all up—all her grandeur and title—to be as she was before."

"Janet, I do not know what has come to you to-day; you are talking in a most unseemly manner, I consider. Gwendoline is a very fortunate girl; and you will do well to follow her example."

Mrs. Mervyn lifted her head and looked full at her rebellious daughter; but that daughter saw beneath the outward show of haughty calmness the shadow of a doubt, that could not be wholly set aside. She turned without another word and left the room, but her mother knew that Gwendoline's secret was in her sister's keeping; and that disguise it as she might before the world, that anonymous letter was only too true in its wording, and the first victim had been offered at the altar of her ambition.

## CHAPTER II.

### MR. ASHBY'S LITTLE DIFFICULTY.

“THE woman must be mad! Can’t think of her daughter remaining in the choir after what has passed ; Miss Bottomly’s bad example ; ought to be reprimanded ! What the dev— I mean, what in the world can she mean by it ? ”

And Mr. Ashby pushed his spectacles farther up his aquiline nose, and passed his hand over his mouth, his usual habit when vexed or agitated. He was a tall, spare man, with restless eyes, and a nervous, hurried manner, which extended itself even to the performance of his priestly functions ; for, though a good preacher, he was not regarded by his flock with that affectionate reverence which had been accorded to his predecessor ; neither did his really fine talents and learned discourses, meet with the appreciation they justly merited. Perhaps this was due more to the Vicar’s retiring and unsociable disposition than to any lack of sympathy on the part of his congregation.

"I must see Cunmore ; he understands these sort of things better than I do," he muttered, as he once more read through the letter which was causing him so much perturbation. "They are always wanting me to turn somebody out of the choir. I can't afford to lose good voices for the sake of people's whims and fancies. I must go and see what Maria says."

And relieved to be able to lay the burden of a disagreeable decision upon somebody else's shoulders, Mr. Ashby rose from his seat, and taking up Mrs. Mervyn's letter, went to the morning-room, where poor Mrs. Ashby spent her lonely days, unable to move from the sofa, and rarely seeing any one but her husband and maid from week's end to week's end. She bore up wonderfully through it all ; and was, perhaps, the only person upon earth, except his Curate, who could get her husband to listen to reason. Her gentle voice, and the sight of her calm, pale face, did more to convince him of an error in judgment than did all the talking in the world.

"How are you feeling to-day, Maria?" the Vicar asked as he entered the room, walking

solemnly on tip toe, and peering anxiously through his spectacles to see if his wife were alone.

"Pretty well, thank you, dear. Have you finished your sermon?"

"No—confound it! I beg your pardon, my love; but really I have been so upset and vexed this morning I don't know what I say. Just read this letter; it's really too bad of them." And Mr. Ashby pushed up his spectacles two or three times with unnecessary energy.

"The Miss Leslies have resigned too, haven't they?" Mrs. Ashby said quietly, as she gave back the letter to her husband.

"Yes; that's the worst of it. They won't sing in the Guild, and there's a concert coming off soon. Robertson has cut up very rusty about it, and now Janet Mervyn will leave the choir, and, I suppose, that little governess too. Why, I shall have to fall back upon a choir of *school children!*" wrathfully.

"Why not ask Miss Bottomly to resign then, if it is on her account they are leaving?"

"But I can't. She teaches in the Sunday school, helps me choose the hymns, and plays the har-

monium at the children's service. I really *can't* do without her."

"Peters says people are talking of her a great deal in the village, of the way she is running after Mr. Robertson. I do not consider it a good example for the village girls by any means. If I could only get about, I should certainly make it my business, as the clergyman's wife, to give her a hint. Besides, I hear she has set some very unpleasant reports about, of both the Mervyn girls and the Leslies."

Mrs. Ashby paused, and looked at her husband; he seemed lost in thought.

"Is she engaged to Robertson I wonder?" he said at length.

"Hardly so, I should think. Mr. Robertson does not appear to be the sort of man to care for a girl like that."

"I shall ask him; that will be the best way. I suppose, if she married him, there would be no more of this fuss," Mr. Ashby said, querulously.

"You can't ask him the question point-blank, Arthur, can you? He might resent it?"

Mrs. Ashby smiled as she spoke. Her husband's

peculiar disregard for people's feelings amused her not a little, though she did her best, in many cases, to counteract the evil.

"I don't care for his resentment. Something must be done. I am not going to be worried like this; I shall settle it somehow or other."

"You had far better reprimand Mary Bottomly herself," said Mrs. Ashby, quietly. "Why don't you?"

"Because I— Oh, I don't know; she might be offended, and leave the choir," said Mr. Ashby hastily, as he prepared to leave the room again. Evidently, his wife was not of his mind in this matter; he would go and see his Curate and get his idea.

"That would be about the best thing that could happen," thought Mrs. Ashby to herself, as the door closed behind the Vicar's retreating form, but she forbore to give the thought words.

It was not often that the Vicar of Grayling honoured his parish by making a tour of it as he was doing this morning. Mr. Cunmore might be seen at all hours of the day in and about the village, but the Vicar, never. He did not profess

to visit the poor, he said; he left that to his Curate. As long as his flock saw his face twice on a Sunday, and heard his voice the same number of times, that was as much as could be expected of him.

Much astonishment, therefore, was rife when the tall form of their pastor was seen to pass along the village on this particular morning of which I am speaking, and much vain conjecture as to his motives for doing so. Coming up the street were Miss Bottomly and Mr. Robertson. The former coloured when she caught sight of the Vicar, and appeared inclined to turn back.

“Morning, Miss Bottomly; morning, Robertson. I wanted to see you particularly,” turning to the latter.

“Certainly, sir; I will turn back with you. Miss Bottomly will excuse me, I am sure.”

He lifted his hat with scant ceremony to his astonished companion, and abruptly turned from her towards Mr. Ashby.

“I am at your service,” he said calmly.

Mr. Ashby looked at him in some surprise; his manner was strange, his face white and ghastly.

"Aren't you well, Robertson?" he said kindly, as, with a hurried good-bye to Miss Bottomly, they turned away down the village street.

"Yes; quite, thanks. I feel the heat rather; and with a hundred and fifty children in a room, one can't keep very cool," Mr Robertson said, with an attempt at a laugh.

"No, no; of course not. Er— Robertson, I wanted particularly to speak to you on an important subject."

Mr. Ashby stopped. The schoolmaster turned upon him a keen, questioning look; then lifted his hat from his head, flourished his handkerchief over his pale face, replaced his hat, drew a long breath, and said calmly—

"I am all attention, sir."

"I'm afraid you'll think me impertinent, Robertson, but I can't help it. I must have this matter cleared up; and you seem to be the only man implicated."

Mr. Robertson started; his face grew whiter.

"Now—what I want you to tell me, is this: are you engaged to Miss Bottomly?"

It was out now. Mr. Ashby felt relieved; so,

apparently, did Mr. Robertson, for he drew another long breath.

“Engaged to Miss Bottomly, sir? You must be joking.”

“No, I’m not. People say that if you are not you ought to be.”

Mr. Robertson laughed.

“People are very much mistaken, sir. I never led Miss Bottomly to think I in any way admired her. She is a nice girl, and I have met her often. I never thought of making love to her.”

This was not strictly true; for, if the gossips were to be believed, unmistakable love passages *had* taken place between them.

“I am glad of it, Robertson, I am glad of it. I like the girl myself, and should be sorry for her to break her heart for anyone; but she seems to like you, and, as I said before, people say she runs after you, and you encourage her.”

“I am not responsible for Miss Bottomly’s actions, sir. I repeat it, I do *not* encourage her, and I have never led her to believe I either cared for her or intended to marry her, for I am married already.”

He said the words quietly enough, but there came a spasm as of intense mental agony across his face, like a wave of the troubled ocean.

“*Married?* Good—I mean how curious you never let us know before! We”—

“Thought me a bachelor. I know it, and I must ask you, sir, not to mention the subject again, it is a painful one.”

“Ah, yes, yes, I see.” Then aside, “Poor fellow, wife ran away from him, just like women, always want to turn things topsy-turvy.”

Mr. Ashby drew his fingers across his lips, pushed up his spectacles, and then looked at the schoolmaster.

“I say, Robertson, don’t you think it would be better to tell Miss Bottomly of—?”

“My dear sir, you are wholly mistaken as to my relations with that young lady. I assure you she does not regard me in any light but that of an acquaintance.” Mr. Robertson spoke pettishly.

“Well, well, there’s nothing more to be said then, and I’m as much in a hole as ever,” the Vicar replied, dubiously. “I will wish you good-morning.”

“Stay a moment, sir, I have been wanting to say something to you myself. It is my intention to resign my post as schoolmaster, as business calls me abroad for a time, and I should be very much obliged if you could let me go as soon as possible.”

Mr. Robertson uttered his speech in short, jerky sentences, as though repeating a message which he had taken great trouble to learn off by heart.

“God bless my soul!” exclaimed the startled Vicar, forgetting to pick and choose his words in his astonishment and vexation. “What in the world are you going to leave for?”

“Simply as I told you, sir, business calls me abroad for a time, and I am anxious to get away as soon as possible.”

“But—but—confound it all, sir, what do you think I am going to do? I can’t fill your place all in a minute!”

“Nor do I wish you to do so, Mr. Ashby. I have but given you notice of my leaving; when you have obtained another schoolmaster I shall go, till then I am, of course, at your service.”

"Humph—very well. I suppose that is all you have to say? Good-morning."

"Two people out of my choir, three out of the Guild, and now Robertson going. It seems really as if there were some truth in those reports about Mary Bottomly after all! I'll go and see her mother," and inwardly anathematizing his whole congregation in general, and the members of his choir in particular, Mr. Ashby pursued his way down the village, "to have it out" with Mrs. Bottomly.

## CHAPTER III.

### NO INTENTIONS.

MARY Bottomly had made up her mind. Now to make up her mind was, with this strong-minded and astute young person, to *act*; and she resolved, within her inmost heart, to stand it no longer.

For once in her life Mrs. Bottomly had spoken her mind to her head-strong daughter, and declared that, sooner than have any more talk about Mary's absurd infatuation for the village schoolmaster, she would give up Elm Grove and go right away from the neighbourhood.

It was all Mr. Ashby's fault, the girl thought to herself, as she put on her hat with its scarlet feather, and surveyed herself complacently in her looking-glass. His, and those Mervyns and Leslies, who were, no doubt, jealous of her. They should not say what they had said for nothing. She would have her revenge, and it should not be of the common order of revenge, but something deeper and more subtle—that

would make their lives miserable, as they were making hers. And Captain Macgregor, too, she had heard what *he* said about her; but for *him* she cared little—he was good-looking, and, therefore, not to be scorned. She would do him an ill turn if it came in her way, not otherwise. Some day she would be even with them all. And Miss Bottomly laughed scornfully as she ran downstairs and out of the front door, slamming it noisily behind her, and making her mother jump and prick her finger with the long darning-needle in the sock she was mending.

It was not a nice day out of doors. The autumn mists hung over the fields, concealing the hills altogether, and making everything look grey and damp. Heavy drops hung from the branches of the trees, and soaked the falling leaves, while a stillness like death brooded over all, and—

The lowering element  
Scowled o'er the darkened landscape.

Miss Bottomly, however, cared nothing for the weather. She drew up the collar of her ulster more closely round her throat, and took her way down through the village, and towards the school-

house. She had calculated her time well. Mr. Robertson was at that moment coming out. He did not see the grey figure coming so quickly towards him, he never cast so much as a glance towards the scarlet feather, gradually losing its jaunty appearance now, under the dispiriting influence of the misty atmosphere. He shut the gate behind him with a sharp click, and took his way up the hill towards the woods.

"Good," said Mary to her herself. And she slackened speed and went into the post-office.

"Any letters, Mrs. Pipin?" she asked, sweetly, of the sinister-looking post mistress.

"None for *you*, miss," was the curt reply. Then, as Miss Bottomly, with a smiling "good-day," took her departure, Mrs. Pipin muttered to herself—"Nice excuse, ain't it, comin' in ere for yer letters? *Letters*, indeed! *schoolmaster* more likely!"

Up the narrow woodland path went Mary Bottomly, jauntily, taking no heed of the damp, sodden leaves beneath her feet, of the dripping branches overhead. She stopped every now and then to listen for the sound of the footsteps she

was following, or to peer into the misty depths of the wood for signs of any occupant of its solitude. Nobody was to be seen. The leaves were falling slowly, with a dismal persistency; now and then a shower of them, damp and soaked with rain, would fall, and the girl shuddered as she felt them wet and cold against her face.

Gradually her spirits were giving way before the dismal surroundings of the shadowy wood, and her purpose grew each moment less and less attainable. She made up her mind to forego it, and retrace her steps, when a slight sound fell upon her ear—it was a sneeze—an unmistakably manly and most unromantic sneeze, and yet no sound of sweetest music could have been more welcome to the listening ears of Mary Bottomly, for she recognized it at once as Mr. Robertson's. He had a cold, and she had heard him sneeze before. The sound came certainly from him.

Endued with fresh courage, the girl gathered up her damp skirts from contact with the leaves and brambles in her path, and pursued her way. Surely she must meet him soon. The thick mist, growing thicker too each minute, hid everything

from view, and it was growing dark too. Where could he be ? At last there was a crackling sound of footsteps somewhere among the brushwood to the right of her. She followed the sound, and came upon the object of her search.

He took no heed of her approach : he was hurrying wildly too and fro, pushing about the leaves with a stick, and talking to himself in low, eager tones. The girl stood watching him, petrified with astonishment, not unmixed with fear. Suddenly he turned and saw her close to him, and uttering a cry of horror, turned to flee.

“ Stay, Mr. Robertson ! It is I, Mary Bottomly. Oh, don’t leave me ; it is getting so dark, and I am so frightened ! ”

The schoolmaster stopped ; then came back slowly to her side.

“ What are you doing here ? ” he asked, sternly. “ I—I came for a walk, and I missed the path, and then I saw you and— Have you lost anything ? ” breaking off, and looking inquiringly at him.

“ No—yes : I have lost a—a letter.”

“ May I help you to find it ? Do let me ! ”

She stooped, and was about to push aside the leaves with her umbrella, when her companion seized her arm.

“Let it alone!” he almost shouted. “Girl! would you betray me to”— Then suddenly letting her arm go, he added more calmly—“Come home, Miss Bottomly; this is no place for you. Come at once.”

There was more than entreaty in his tones, there was command. Mary turned obediently, and walked on by his side wondering greatly.

“Do you know I am going away?” he said abruptly, after a long silence.

“Going away!” she repeated slowly, a great misery coming into her heart; “*going away!*”

“Yes—I am leaving England altogether. My business will take me abroad. I shall be gone some time—perhaps for ever.”

He laughed sardonically. Mary made no answer. Her face had grown white, and tears rose in her throat to choke her utterance.

“Won’t you say you are sorry?” he said, gently. His words and tone put the finishing stroke to the girl’s misery. With a low cry she suddenly

stopped short, covered her face with her hands and sobbed aloud.

“Why, Mary, what is the matter?”

Mr. Robertson’s face expressed unmitigated astonishment, not unmixed with perplexity.

“My dear Mary, do stop crying. Surely you are not so sorry as all that? Believe me, I am not worth it.”

Miss Bottomly lifted her tear-stained face.

“You don’t really mean it?” she gasped.

“Indeed I do. I never meant to stay here when the need for me to do so was passed. It has done so now, and I am *free!*”

He uttered the words with a laugh so fiendish that his listener involuntarily shivered.

“You are cold; come home,” taking one of her hands from her face, and leading her down the path. “Why do you cry?”

“Because”—sob—“you are going; and”—sob—“you are the only person I care for in the wide world!” chorus of sobs.

Mr. Robertson smiled to himself, but he did not answer for a few minutes. When he did it was very firmly and gently.

“ Mary, you must never say that again ; I am a bad, wicked man. *How* bad and wicked you may, perhaps, learn ere long. I am no fit husband for you.” The girl started and looked up quickly, but he went on. “ If I have ever led you to believe that I regarded you otherwise than a sister, it is more my misfortune than my fault, for you were the only one who seemed to care for me in my lonely life ; but I could not marry you if I would, for I have a wife already.”

Again, as once before that day, a tide of mental agony swept over his face, making it more ghastly still. Mary seized his arm.

“ How *dare* you tell me that *now* ? ” she asked fiercely. “ Where is *she*—your wife ? ”

“ Alas ! I do not know. She left me years ago ; she— But do not speak of her, it maddens me. I am going to find her ; to seek for her till I die ! ”

He whispered the last words hoarsely. Mary turned a white, stern face towards him.

“ You have broken my heart,” she said, in slow, cold tones ; “ but I forgive you, for I am a woman, and—I loved you.”

Her voice grew tremulous over the last three words, but with a gasp she regained her self-possession, and went on in the same hard voice.

“Whatever I am in the future remember *you* made me. I live now but for revenge on those who have linked my name with yours! Let us go home.”

She walked on in front of him, with her head erect and her face white and stern, looking almost handsome in its outraged dignity. On through the sodden paths, with the dripping branches brushing their faces, the thick mist penetrating through the girl’s rough ulster, and streaming in little trickling drops from the once pretty hat, and now, alas! unrecognizable scarlet feather, on through the deserted village street to the gate of Elm Grove. Here Mr. Robertson bade her farewell.

“You said you forgave me; say it once more,” he said quickly.

“I forgive you—at least, my better nature does. My other nature cannot, for you have made it ten-fold worse than it was before.”

“And you will not wish me God-speed?”

“No ; for you are going to seek *her*. And it would do you no good from such as I am, and shall be for ever now.”

There was a depth of despair in her tone which touched him.

“I never thought of this !” he cried, with keen self-reproach. “Oh, Mary, do not lay this fresh sin to my charge !”

“You could not help it ; I ran after you, and you encouraged me, so they said. It is but just that I should suffer, for I cared for you and you only love your *wife*. Good-night.”

She turned from him and entered the little gate, he heard her open the front door. A flood of light came forth for one brief instant, then the door was closed ; and outside there was only the mist and the sodden ground, the dark shadowy sky and moaning wind, and the man who dared not call upon a vengeance-loving God for forgiveness, and knew not when that vengeance might overtake himself.

Mrs. Bottomly looked up at her eldest daughter as she entered the cosy parlour, where Emily, assisted by a stout, rosy country girl, was setting the

table for tea. Mary threw herself down on the rug, and gazed moodily into the fire.

“Mother,” she said, when they were alone, “Mr. Robertson is going away directly to look for his wife.”

## CHAPTER IV.

### GATHERING SHADOWS.

“How I do hate these nasty, dull days! one never knows what it is going to do, whether rain and soak one through, or simply look threatening just to tease one!” and Constance Leslie turned from the window of the morning-room at the Abbey a cloud of decided discontent upon her pretty face.

“Can’t you get something to do, Con? You fidget one so, walking aimlessly about!” said Phyllis, looking up from her painting.

“Yes, do, Con; you are enough to drive us all to the verge of melancholy madness,” added Olive, from her seat by the fire, where she was deep in a new novel.

“Now look here, girls, it is all very well for you to grumble at *me*, but just look what unsociable creatures you are yourselves. Phyl has put all her ideas into that ugly bunch of narcissus she is going to palm off upon Geoffrey for a Christmas

present, and you, Olive, haven't spoken a word all the morning. It is likely I shall grumble"—

"You wouldn't feel inclined to grumble if you only got something to do," said Phyllis.

"My dear, when did I ever *get* anything to do in my life? Work comes to me as a general rule, unsought, otherwise I should be—

As idle as a painted ship  
Upon a painted ocean.

"And much more useful you would be, too; wouldn't she, Olive?" said Phyllis, a mischievous smile showing the pretty dimples in her cheeks.

For all answer, Constance rushed at her and tilted her chair backwards till she cried for mercy.

"Say you are sorry for calling me a painted ship, then," was the stern command.

"I never did call you one," anxiously.

"You said I should be more useful as one, though; didn't she, Olive?"

"But I didn't mean it! let me go, Con dear?"

The chair slowly regained its usual position, and Constance walked over to the fire-place.

"Olive, I am going out."

"Very well."

“Don’t say ‘very well’ in those cold tones. Don’t you care that I am going out at the risk of catching my death of cold, through being soaked through and through by a possible shower ?”

“Take an umbrella.”

“Don’t possess one, my dear. It is a very strange thing, but of all the umbrellas we got in London, and had engraved with our names, mine is the one which is broken. I shall carry an alpaca next as Mary Bottomly does, since you take mine, and won’t lend me yours.”

“By-the-bye, I met Mary Bottomly in the village yesterday, and she wouldn’t pass me—she went into the baker’s shop,” said Phyllis, suddenly.

“Of course she did. She has heard we have left the Guild, no doubt. I told Mr. Lorne, and he looked delighted; he never liked our going to a thing of the sort out of his parish. He smiled, and said—‘Ah! the best thing you could do, Miss Constance, under the circumstances.’”

Connie delivered the speech in the slow, rather nasal, tones of the Rev. Frederick Lorne, who had, through much practice of intoning, arrived at a

chronic state of delivering his sentences on one note, and with great precision of utterance.

“ Connie, dear, don’t imitate Mr. Lorne; it looks so bad if the servants hear you,” said Olive, laying down her book, and looking at her sister.

“ Well, I really always forget. It is so very hard to remember, Miss Leslie, under the circumstances.”

“ Really, Connie, I am ashamed of you!” said Olive, laughing, however, in spite of herself.

“ I thought you were going out, Connie,” said Phyllis, moving away from her easel, to see the effect of her labours.

“ So I am. Why?”

“ Nothing; only it seems clearing up, and we are rather busy.”

“ Phyllis, if you say another word I will make you come, too,” said her sister, severely. “ You remember the day when you teased me about saying ‘good-evening’ to the young man I met at the Macgregor’s, when I saw him in the wood at eleven o’clock in the morning—and I dressed you in all the old things I could find, and made you stand at the gate for everyone to see you! I

will do it again!" and Miss Constance's face proved the truth of her assertion.

Phyllis laughed at the recollection.

"You wouldn't say such a thing now, would you, dear?" she said, with an air of innocence.

"Oh, dear, I don't know. Only the other evening I said to Mr. Raynor, when he asked if he might have the pleasure of taking me down to dinner, 'Oh, *thank* you!' and he looked so mystified."

"Connie, you never did!"

"I did, really. I have no mind of my own, you know."

"What must Mr. Raynor have thought of my bringing up of such a foolish damsel? He would agree with Mrs. Mervyn that I was quite unfitted for the task," said Olive, with a sigh.

"Now, Olive, don't 'sigh over me, or I shall go and drown myself in the briny deep, and you will find me by moonlight, looking like the 'Christian Martyr.' You will be sorry, then," shaking her golden head with a melancholy air.

"Connie, excuse my repeating the question, but are you going out?"

"Phyllis, you will forgive my apparent indecision, but I cannot make up my mind, under the circumstances."

"Oh, Con, what a chatterbox you are! Do go and leave us in peace, I cannot get on with my book a bit, and I have got to such an interesting part!" said Olive, plaintively.

"Ah! wait till *I* write a book. That will be something worth reading! Mab is at work at hers now. I found it yesterday, and wrote a description of her heroine, by way of assisting her, you know. You will see her delight when she finds how kind I have been."

"I suppose you would take *yourself* for the heroine of *your* novel? An ethereal creature, with blue eyes, golden hair, and an expression of flower-like modesty upon her hyacinth countenance," said Phyllis, demurely.

"No, I should make her like *you*—of form rotund, of complexion a bright red, with a slit in her chin, and a passion for daubing impossible flowers upon everything in the house."

"Janet Mervyn is my idea of a heroine for a novel," said Phyllis, thoughtfully, taking no notice

of her sister's polite speech. "She is so interesting, isn't she, Olive?"

"Yes. I wonder if they will let her marry John Raynor. I don't believe Mrs. Mervyn likes him. She told me once his parents were 'nobodies.'"

"Well, *he* is a gentleman, every inch of him, at any rate—far preferable to those insipid youths we used to meet in London. I would sooner talk to John Raynor than any man *I* know."

"Olive wouldn't. She prefers Mr. Gold"—

"Now, Constance, how often am I tell you I will not have you talking in that way. Mr. Goldie is nothing to us, and I do not wish anyone to know we have seen him," said Miss Leslie, severely.

"Martin told me she didn't believe it was Mr. Goldie at all who came," said Constance.

"Martin knows nothing about it; she is too fond of giving her opinion," replied Olive, not looking up from her book.

At this moment the door opened, and Mabel entered—an angry look upon her fair, piquante face.

"Olive, you really must speak to Connie! it is

too bad of her! Only yesterday I finished the best chapter in my book, and to-day, when I come to read it over, I find she been putting in all sorts of nonsense. Just listen," and Mabel began to read, in deeply-injured tones, the following passage from the closely written pages in her hand:—

“The morning sunlight fell with glorious slanting beams upon the pretty thatched cottage; upon its quaint old garden, filled with bright flowers, whose sweetness was wafted far and near upon the summer breezes”—

“I am sure that's *lovely*!” interrupted Connie. Mabel went on—

“At the door of this primitive and picturesque dwelling stood Dorothy—blowing soap-bubbles. Her rosy cheeks were inflated to their widest extent, her eyes seemed starting out of her head, and her crimson nose vied with the roseate hues of her gown, as the transparent ball, glowing with prismatic colours, grew larger and larger with every breath she drew. Never had she looked so fair, thought the village postman, as he watched.

her from the lane, and heard the light cackle of her shrill laughter, as, after repeated efforts to toss it in the air, the bubble burst. "Sich is life!" he cried, in awe-struck accents, as he mournfully selected a letter from his bag and handed it to the girl. Then he gave one regretful look at the *lovely* churchwarden, and sadly went on his way."

"Now, Olive, I only ask you, *is* that the way to behave to me? I am sure my heroine is a *lady*!" in vexed tones.

"My dear Mab, blowing soap-bubbles is a most ladylike pastime!" exclaimed Connie, opening her blue eyes in injured innocence. "I am sure that is a most *graphic* description."

"I wish you wouldn't laugh at her!" cried Mabel, as her sisters gave vent to uncontrollable fits of mirth. "I can't see any fun in it!"

"That is because you have no perception of the funny side of nature, my dear. But don't be cross; I'll take it all out, and write you another piece, all about Dorothy's peach-blossom complexion, flower face, tawny skin, and all those

things they say about people in books now-a-days, said the irrepressible Constance, catching up one of the pugs and waltzing round the room with him, to the imminent danger of being bitten.

Soon the whole room was in an uproar. The rest of the dogs, roused from their cosy slumbers on the rug before the fire, sprang up, and ran howling and barking after the girl, as she twirled round and round, singing, at the top of a sweet soprano voice, the refrain of "Sweethearts," till the appearance of Martin at the door caused a sudden stoppage in her evolutions.

The maid's face was white and scared—she seemed unable to speak.

"What is the matter, Martin? Have you seen old Lord Pendlebury again?" asked Constance, setting down the pug, and looking ruefully at a great rent in her gown, the result of her recent scrimmage.

"Miss Leslie—could I speak to you, miss?"

Martin spoke hesitatingly, glancing round un-

easily at her other young mistresses, who were now regarding her with round eyes of astonishment—what could the maid possibly have to say to Olive which *they* might not hear? Then she turned and left the room, closing the door hurriedly behind her.

“What can be the matter?” cried Phyllis, Connie, and Mabel, all in a breath.

“Nothing much, I daresay,” replied their elder sister carelessly, as she put down the pug on her knee, closed her book, and rose from her cosy seat. “She has probably broken something.”

“Her face did not wear the look of grim triumph with which she usually announces such catastrophes. Perhaps Hall has a ‘stroke;’ she is always threatening to have one,” remarked Constance, slowly.

“She would have told *that*. Martin is always so ready to announce a terrible occurrence,” said Phyllis, looking perplexed and alarmed.

Olive found the maid standing outside in the wide hall. She was plaiting and unplaiting the corner of her apron, her face white and her eyes full of terror.

"Well, what is it?" asked her mistress, sharply.

"Oh, ma'am; Miss Leslie! Such a dreadful thing has happened! I didn't like to say before the young ladies for fear of scaring them like, but —but"—

"Well?" Olive's face was getting as white as the maid's. "Cannot you speak, Martin?" she said, in a tone of severity quite unusual to her.

"Poor Mr. Raynor has been found dead in the Wildash woods, close by here, *murdered!*!"

Martin's voice sank to a whisper.

"Murdered?" echoed her mistress; "*murdered?*"

"Yes, ma'am; and nobody knows who did it yet. But they've taken him down to the 'Grayling Arms,' and there's to be an inquest tomorrow. Old Dawson's sheepdog found the body, and Dawson says it must have been there for days. The face is all disfigured like; and nobody couldn't tell, except for the clothes, who it were."

Martin's tongue seemed loose now; she told her tale with much volubility.

"Did Dawson tell you this?" asked Olive, in

low, scared tones, and her face rivalled the white muslin of her fischu in colour.

“No, ma’am ; it was Mrs. Peter’s boy as came for the washing. He met Dawson in the village, and everybody is talking of it.”

Olive stood lost in thought.

“What is to-day ?” she asked presently.

“Tuesday, ma’am. It was just this day week that Miss Mervyn was married,” added Martin, as though the coincidence bore considerable weight in the matter.

“Poor Janet !” thought Miss Leslie to herself as she turned her steps once more towards the morning-room to break the sad tidings to her sisters.

“Good gracious, Olive ! what has happened ?” cried Constance, while the others joined in the chorus, “Yes, what has happened ? Tell us quickly !”

And she told them, with white lips and eyes full of sorrow, for everybody liked John Raynor, the Leslie girls particularly ; for since their first coming to the Abbey, he had always been a good and obliging neighbour ; and they had met him so

often at the Mervyn's and other houses round, that an intimacy had sprung up between them and the merry, genial young squire.

"But who could possibly have done it?"

Mabel's awestruck face grew more awestruck still, as she asked the question which was uppermost in the minds of them all.

"Poachers, perhaps," suggested Connie, who had great ideas of the murderous instincts of that troublesome community.

"I cannot quite make out where they found him. It must have been this end of the woods, not Grayling. Martin said it was close by."

"Olive," Phyllis spoke almost in a whisper, "what *will* poor Janet do? It will kill her."

"There is to be an inquest." Olive spoke dreamily, as though she had not heard her sister's words.

"It is the most awful thing I ever heard. I shall never dare to walk in those woods again," said Constance.

"Nor, I," echoed Phyllis and Mabel.

Olive said nothing; she went back to her seat by the fire, but her book lay unheeded in her lap,

and her eyes, fixed sorrowfully upon the sparkling flames, were full of anxious and perplexing thoughts. She took no heed of her sisters' horrified conjectures as to the recent sad event; and when they gathered round the fire and talked in whispers of the blow it would be to Janet, of the dead man's many good qualities, and their regret for the loss of one who was everywhere extolled and esteemed, she made no effort to join in the conversation, but still sat on in perfect silence, as though the news had stunned her into apathy.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE MYSTERY OF WILDASH WOOD.

THE prayer bell was ringing out its solemn summons at Abbott's Home, and servants were appearing from all directions to take their stand in the hall, there to wait in a line for the coming of the cook to head the procession to the dining-room. Down the stairs came Miss Dufferin and the two little girls, one in tears, for Binnie was not a clever child, and an hour's lessons before her breakfast, when she was both dazed and hungry, did not serve to clear her intellect. But Mrs. Mervyn's precept was, that a governess got into lazy habits if she had no duties to attend to before eight o'clock in the morning, and she could not have lessons without pupils; so the little girls were made martyrs, as well as their preceptress, to her, perhaps, judicious theory.

“ You are rather late this morning, Miss Dufferin,” Mrs. Mervyn said coldly, as the governess

received her limp hand. "Had you not finished lessons?"

Miss Dufferin coughed nervously, and looked at Binnie.

"Yes, but I have been trying to comfort Beatrice. She is rather unhappy this morning."

"Oh," said Mrs. Mervyn, and turned away as the servants filed in and took their places.

The morning's devotions did not take long, for Mr. Mervyn generally read at break-neck speed; and were it not that one form of prayer was always used, and therefore easily learnt by heart, I doubt if any one would have been a bit the wiser or better when they rose from their knees. Not that Mr. Mervyn was in any wise an irreligious man, far from it: he was as good and God-fearing as the best of us, but his reading was like all he did, hurried and anxious—as though fearful of being left behind.

To-day, however, he seemed to be less rapid than usual, and twice Thomas had given forth a gruff "Amen" in the wrong place, thinking his master had come to an end. At last they rose, the servants filing out as they had come in. As the

little kitchenmaid was bringing up the rear, Mrs. Mervyn stopped her.

“What is the matter, Martha?”

The girl turned round, showing a white, scared face and red eyes.

“Nothing, ma’am; it’s only”—she hesitated—“my—my throat, ma’am.”

“Oh; well come to me after breakfast in the storeroom, I will give you something for it,” replied her mistress, kindly.

Mrs. Mervyn was always kind to her servants, and for that reason kept them longer than most people, in spite of her hasty temper.

“I am afraid that little Martha will have to go; she is not strong enough for the place, and I don’t fancy cook is kind to her,” said Mrs. Mervyn as she took up the sugar-tongs and began to put a lump into each cup on the tray before her.

“She has been crying this morning, I think,” put in Janet, who was cutting the bread with a “bored” expression, as though life were a thing to be endured rather than enjoy—as was indeed rather the case at present—for Janet Mervyn was about as miserable a girl as could be found

in all the United Kingdom, in her own estimation.

“Well, I thought so too,” her mother replied complacently; “but those sort of people always are crying.”

“She is too young; you should get them older, they would be more sensible then,” suddenly remarked Mr. Mervyn, whom nobody had supposed to be listening, he being, to all intents and purposes, deeply absorbed in the contents of a pile of letters.

“She is quite old enough for her work, and that is all I care about. Besides, her sister is younger than she, and is actually one of the housemaids at the Folly; John Raynor’s housekeeper”—

A little cry from Janet and a loud exclamation from her husband stayed Mrs. Mervyn’s tongue.

“What is the matter?” she asked, astonished.

“I—I thought I had cut my finger, mamma,” faltered Janet, whose cheeks had become crimson.

“Yes,” said Mr. Mervyn hastily; “we *both* thought she had cut her finger. Pray be more careful, my love.”

Here he suddenly rose from his seat, and gathering his letters together, left the room.

“ How careless, Janet ! You have quite upset your father ; he hasn’t had any breakfast ! What *could* have made him go off like that ? I am sure he has had bad news of some sort this morning, or something has happened to the bullocks. This wretched farm ! ” and Mrs. Mervyn sighed.

There was an ominous silence. Janet sat pretending to eat her breakfast, but the eyes which she every now and then lifted towards the window, against which the rain was patterning in ceaseless monotony, were dim with unshed tears. Miss

Dufferin looked sympathizingly at the pale, sad face ; for she was fond of Janet, who never lost an opportunity of befriending the lonely little governess.

Binnie was also watching her sister, and simultaneously the tears gathered afresh in her own blue eyes, and a deep sob escaped her.

“ Really, Miss Dufferin, I cannot think what you have been doing to Binnie this morning ? Dearest child, what *is* the matter ? ”

Mrs. Mervyn spoke crossly. Miss Dufferin

bent towards the child, and whispered in her ear. The answer was a doleful shake of the flaxen head.

“Indeed, Mrs. Mervyn, I have not said anything to her to make her cry,” said the governess, almost in tears herself. “It was something she heard in the servants’ hall, I fancy, but she will not tell me what it was.”

“Beatrice come here.”

Binnie got down obediently from her chair, and went round to her mother’s side. She had screwed her pocket handkerchief up into a round, hard ball, and kept dabbing her red eyes with it, to the great detriment of their beauty.

“Now tell me what it was you heard.”

There was no disobeying the stern mandate. Poor Binnie looked at her little sister, who was taking in the whole scene with all a child’s love of mystery; at Janet, whose eyes were absently fixed upon her plate, which she was gently tapping with her knife; and, lastly, at Miss Dufferin, who nodded encouragement.

“It was—it was Annette—she”—

“Well, dear?”

Mrs. Mervyn's tone was sterner. The tears gathered fast in Binnie's already swollen eyes.

"She said somebody had killed John! Oh, *why* did they do it? My own, dear Jack Raynor?"

Binnie ended with a howl, and the tightly rolled pocket-handkerchief was bedewed with her fast falling tears.

"*What* do you say, child? *Who* said *what*?" cried Mrs. Mervyn, aghast.

Janet left off tapping her plate, her face scared and horrified.

"She *did* say so, mother! she said Daw—Dawson had f—f—found him dead in the wood, right up—up at the top by Deerham. Somebody had—had—killed him!" sobbed Binnie.

There was a low, gasping cry, Janet's knife fell with a clatter into her plate, and as Miss Dufferin rushed towards her, she sank backwards in her chair unconscious.

"Ring the bell, please, and then take the children upstairs," said Mrs. Mervyn, coldly, and the terrified governess, relinquishing her hold of the fainting girl, did the stern bidding,

only waiting to ask, in a half-whisper, if she could be of any use.

“No thanks. I think Janet is not well this morning. Those gossiping servants will be the death of me!” Mrs. Mervyn replied, crossly; but her face was very pale, and her knees trembled so, that she could scarcely stand.

“Tell Annette I want her, and ask your master to come here a minute,” she said, hurriedly, to the startled Thomas, who answered the bell.

“James,” Mrs. Mervyn spoke in a whisper, as her husband entered the room, starting visibly at the sight of his daughter’s unconscious form, “it is not true about John Raynor?”

“Quite true, my dear.” Mr. Mervyn’s voice was husky, he drew his hand across his eyes. “I heard it the first thing this morning. Dawson’s dog found the body in the wood, as he came down to the farm about seven o’clock. They have taken him to the ‘Grayling Arms,’ and the inquest will be held to-morrow. I never was so cut up about anything in my life. Poor young fellow, I liked him so! Oh, Sarah! if we had only—does she know?” pointing to Janet.

"Yes, Annette told Binnie—so very silly. Here-  
Annette," to the maid who entered, "run and  
fetch cold water and smelling salts, and be quick.  
Your folly in talking to Miss Beatrice about poor  
Mr. Raynor, has quite upset Miss Mervyn. Don't  
stand staring—*make haste!*"

"Looks as if she cared for him," Mr. Mervyn  
said, thoughtfully, gazing at the ashen hue of the  
pale cheeks, the closed heavy eyes, with the dark  
circles round them.

"Nonsense, James, Janet is always so very ner-  
vous, and I had no idea, of course, what Binnie  
was going to say, or I should have stopped her in  
time to prevent this. You might have told me  
before," reproachfully.

"Well, Sarah, I meant to tell you by-and-bye ;  
I feared it might frighten you, and make you ill, if  
I told you before breakfast," Mr. Mervyn replied,  
twisting his eye-glasses nervously round and  
round.

"I cannot think how it all happened ; who did  
it ?" Mrs. Mervyn said, as with Annette's help  
she began to try and restore Janet to conscious-  
ness.

“ My dear, I cannot tell you anything more, I ”—

“ Hush ! ” said his wife, imperatively, as Janet’s eyes unclosed, and fixed themselves on her father’s face.

“ Papa,” she whispered, hoarsely, “ come here.”

James Mervyn obeyed. She put up her arm round his neck, and drew his face down to hers.

“ Papa, it—it is not true. Say it is not true ! Send for Jack here to me—do, or I shall go mad ! *mad !* ”

She suddenly threw up her arms with a loud shriek, and the next instant lay once more unconscious of the blow which had fallen upon her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Had any stranger, visiting the Isle of Wight, chanced in his wanderings to pass through the village of Grayling on the afternoon of October 18, —, he would have wondered greatly what possible event could be taking place to cause so large a concourse of people as was assembled in and about the place. All were attired in their Sunday best, as though for a gala, but the expression upon their faces betokened nothing of joy or festivity. Here and there an old dame

would surreptitiously wipe her eyes with the corner of her spotless apron, as she conversed with a neighbour ; while the men stood about in groups talking earnestly, and shaking their heads now and then in doubt and perplexity.

In front of the small inn, dignified by the name of the "Grayling Arms," was assembled a still larger group of respectably-dressed individuals, mostly men, all of them wearing the same perplexed expression of gloom ; while now and then a look of inquiring expectancy would light up their faces, as they made way for the various vehicles which were arriving one by one at the little inn.

And had the stranger, with natural curiosity, asked an explanation of these mysterious proceedings, he would have been informed that the young Squire of Horsham Dale, an adjoining village, had been found murdered in the Wildash woods, and that the inquest upon his body was to take place at three o'clock this afternoon.

"An I 'opes ter heaven as they'll foind out who murdered un, that I dew," remarked an old woman in the crowd, shaking her aged fist

threateningly at some unseen foe, “fer there warn’t a koinder-hearted young gent in all the Isle o’ Woight, bless un ! ”

And now the clock in the old church tower struck out with slow, measured clang the hour of three, and almost before the last stroke had died away, the coroner drove up to the inn. There was a hush in the assembled concourse of villagers as he alighted from his dog-cart. It seemed to these simple folk as if they could read from his look and manner the probable issue of events.

But Mr. Heathcote’s face bore no evidence of the sad task before him. It was cheerful, even smiling—he was used to this sort of work, it made no manner of impression upon *him*. He exchanged a kindly “Good-day” with one or two acquaintances, and then turned towards a juror who had come out of the inn to meet him.

“How d’ye do, Williams; sorry I’m a little behind hand, had another case up above at Amhurst, near Cowes, you know—woman threw herself out of a window. How”—he lowered his voice, and taking his companion’s arm, they went

into the “Grayling Arms” together, just as the pretty victoria from Abbott’s Home, with its prancing thorough-breds, came dashing along, and drew up at the door.

In it were Mr. Mervyn and his wife—the former looking pale and worried, the latter wearing her most inscrutable expression of countenance.

“No, I will not come in now,” she said, as her husband alighted, and held out his hand to assist her to do likewise; “I shall drive round the village, it is not likely they will want *me*, as I could only say the same as you, but if they should do so, you can easily sign to me as I pass again.”

“Very well, my dear. I would not go far if I were you,” Mr. Mervyn said, as he turned away.

Mrs. Mervyn glanced round her at the sea of expectant faces, and a slight look of contempt curled her lip. Then she opened her book and began to read, while the carriage drove slowly away down the village street—the horses champing impatiently at the restraint imposed upon them, the silver mountings of their harness flashing in the afternoon sun.

Inside the inn a mysterious silence prevailed—the faces of the boots and rosy-cheeked barmaid were awe-struck and serious, indeed, Miss Tibbs had more than once given utterance to her sentiments in these awful words—

“ Well, if I’d ha’ knowed as they’d ha’ been hevin’ dead people sat upon in these ere walls, I’d never ha’ set foot in un for sure ! ”

And now the solemn work of identification begins—the jurors go to view the body, and then several friends and acquaintances of the deceased perform the same melancholy task, James Mervyn amongst the number.

Yes, they observe unanimously, the body is undoubtedly that of John Raynor. The figure, the clothes are his; by them and the colour of the hair he is at once recognized, for the face is so disfigured by a blow from some heavy instrument, and by exposure to the damp and discolouring moisture of the ground, that it is all but unrecognizable.

But it is John Raynor—every one is agreed upon that point; and then the coroner proceeds to collect the evidence of those persons who saw the

dead man last, with a view to gaining some clue as to his murder.

“ For that a crime of the blackest die has been perpetrated, you will agree with me, gentlemen,” went on Mr. Heathcote, as they left the chamber of the dead, and took their seats in the large room set apart for the inquest.

The first person called was Benjamin Dawson, through whose dog the body had been found.

“ I lives up at Deerham,” he deposed, twisting his hat round and round in front of him, “ an’ I comes over every day to work for Mustur Mervyn. I minds they sheep, an’ my dawg ‘e minds un tew. An’ more’n once, when I’ve been a comin’ through that wood lately, Towzer hev seemed ter tell me as thur wur summat wrong. The sense o’ that dawg, misters, yer wouldn’t foind nowheers in a ‘uman bein’. There ‘e’d run all over wi his nose to the ground, whinin’ an’ draggin’ at me ter come ; but I thowt t’were nowt but a rabbit ‘e’d got, an’ I jist said, ‘ Heel, Towzer ! ’ an’ thowt no more about un’. But arter two or three days I ses to myself, ses I, there couldn’t be no rabbit as ‘ud bide theer all this toime ; an’ so I goes, an’

theer I finds the poor young squire. An' I tell yer, misters, I wore that skeered as I took ter my heels, an' never stopped till I got ter Bobby Mitchel's cottage ; and then we got the p'liceman an' told him, an' we 'elped ter carry young master here. An' that's all about it I knows, please yer worship, an' no offence," addressing the coroner.

"Very good ; you may go. But keep about in case we want you again."

Dawson's face wore a look of relief. Somehow or other he had taken it into his head that he was implicated in the murder, by having been the first to discover John Raynor's dead body. He pulled his forelock gratefully to the jury as he shuffled out of the room, his mind at rest on his own score.

The policeman, by name Richard Dobbs, was then called, and deposed to the finding of the body in Wildash wood. Was of opinion it had been dragged there from a distance, and that the murderer had intended to bury it, for there were indications of a hole having been already commenced. Asked if there were any signs of a struggle, replied in the negative. The body was carefully covered over with leaves and bracken,

and the ground had evidently been cleared of all evidences of any fray, had there been one. Richard Dobbs then produced the contents of the murdered man's pockets, also his watch and chain, which had not been touched.

"Not a case of murder by a thief," remarked a juror, astutely.

Mr. Heathcote made no reply; he was closely examining the articles on the table before him, taking them up one by one, and muttering comments upon each.

"A cigar-case, monogram J. R.; humph, very pretty. Meerschaum pipe, poor fellow, he won't want that again; pencil case, gold and ebony, and another J. R. on the seal; a pocket-book, contents evidently not been touched either; two letters from tradesmen, soliciting a continuance of past favours; um, um." Mr. Heathcote paused running his eye down the letters. "A photograph of a lady, very charming face indeed; we will take that, it may be useful. Some visiting cards, "John Raynor, The Folly;" two exhibitor's tickets for the Birmingham Cattle Show of last year; what could be the use of keeping *them*?"

An almanac, engagement tablets, and—that's all."

The coroner laid down the pocket-book, and took up a little silver match box. This was the last thing on the table, and it seemed to interest him more than any of the others. He turned it over and over, and then, after a careful inspection of the inscription on its lid, he handed it in silence to a juror next him.

"Hubert Macgregor, —th Regt. Highlanders, 1876," read the juryman slowly; then he handed it back to the coroner, who put it aside with the photo.

"Call Mrs. Dickson," he said to the officer of the court, who immediately disappeared, returning in a few minutes with a tall, elderly-looking woman, stout and buxom in figure, whose eyes were red with weeping, and her voice weak and trembling.

"Now, Mrs. Dickson," began the coroner kindly as he noticed her distress, "we want you to tell us all you can remember about the last time you saw your master. Don't be afraid and speak up."

Mrs. Dickson curtseyed ; then threw back her shawl, took off her gloves, and after much rummaging in her pocket, drew forth a piece of crumpled paper and a tear-bedewed handkerchief.

“ It’s only the date as I’ve got writ ‘ere, sir, for fear I forget. My memory’s rather bad ; and I’ve been that upset as a goose quill ‘uld knock me to pieces,” she began, seeing the jury look suspiciously at the paper. “ I mind well the day, as my dear young master, bless his heart”—here a sob intervened—“ come home for the last time to the Folly. It were Miss Mervyn’s weddin’ day, an’ I’d been a jokin’ of him that mornin’ afore he set off to go to it, a-sayin’ as ‘ow it did hought to have bin his own. An’ he laughs, an’ ses he, ‘ Mrs. Dickson, you bide a bit ; I’ve got a young lady in my heye as ‘ll please you mighty ; an’ ses he, ‘we’ll have a grand weddin’ then, ses he.’ Well, arter the weddin’ he comes home, and ses he was a goin’ to drive over to Sandown to see a horse as he wanted to buy, an’ he mightn’t be back till late. At ten o’clock he come home, an’ a gent with him ; an’ this gent were to stay all night, an’ I give him the blue-room what we’d jest ‘ad done up with

new bed 'angins an' curtains. A nice young gent he were, an' merry civil-spoken too; but in a mighty 'urry to git away he were, fur he were off fust thing next mornin', afore 'is breakfast even. Well, about ten o'clock, my master he goes out too, lookin' as 'appy as a bird. I pertikler noticed him, cos I was a wonderin' so about that young lady, an' hoped it was one of o' the Miss Leslies; nice young things they is, an' that domesticated, it's wonderful. Well, sir, Mr. Raynor come back about twelve with the Captain"—

"The who?" demanded the coroner, sharply.

"The Captain—Captain Macgregor, sir—eh, my master did look bad, an' he were a-speakin' quite hasty like to the Captain, as were tryin' to soothe him. An' then he says to me, ses he, 'Mrs. Dickson, shut the house hup, an' don't look to see me 'ere again for one while. Pack me a portmancy an' send it up to London at once, directed to the Waterloo Station, "to be left till called for;"' an' from that day to this I've never set heyes on him, till I 'eared he was found murdered."

Here Mrs. Dickson's feelings were too many for her, and she sobbed outright.

"Had you reason to think your master and Captain Macgregor had been quarrelling?"

Mrs. Dickson took her handkerchief from her swollen eyes, and stared at the coroner in astonishment.

"Quarrelling? No, sir; but I didn't hear nothin' as they said, only Captain Macgregor, he ses, in his laughin' way, ses he, 'Don't you believe nothin' he ses,' Mrs. Dickson; ' and my master ses, 'Macgregor, you're a fool!'"

"Complimentary," remarked Mr. Heathcote, drily. "Was your master in the habit of going away suddenly like this?"

"Lor yes, sir! to London; he was hup an' down most times for a day or so; an' that's where I thought, in course, he were now, else I should have been in a fidget."

"And he never wrote to you while he was away?"

"Never, sir. I allus used to 'ave heverything ready against he come home promiscus-like."

"Had he any enemy that you know of?"

Mrs. Dickson considered a moment, rolling up her violet bonnet strings to assist her memory.

“No, sir; I shouldn’t think he had a henemy in the ’ole world, blees him!” she said, after a pause, her sobs breaking out afresh.

“Thank you, Mrs. Dickson; that will do for the present. We will now, gentlemen”—turning to the jury, who were consulting together in an undertone—“call for the next witness—Mr Mervyn.”

## CHAPTER VI.

### GRAYLING IS BECOMING FAMOUS.

“This is a bad business, Mr. Mervyn,” said the coroner, a perplexed look on his cheery countenance, as he turned the little silver match-box absently in his fingers.

“A very bad business, indeed,” responded Mr. Mervyn, thoughtfully.

Mr. Heathcote put down the match-box, with a little shaking of himself together, as though coming back to affairs of the present, and proceeded to question the witness before him with his usual matter-of-fact precision.

“You were a friend of the deceased, I believe?”

“Yes—an intimate friend.”

“Upon what occasion did you last see him?”

“Upon the day following my daughter’s wedding he called upon me.”

Mr. Heathcote glanced at a memorandum before him.

“That was the day he signified his intention of going away—the last time apparently that he was seen alive. May I ask, Mr. Mervyn, whether he had any motive in calling upon you, or if it was merely a passing visit?”

Mr. Mervyn hesitated.

“He called to see me upon a—a private matter,” he returned, slowly.

The coroner glanced keenly through his gold spectacles at the witness.

“I am afraid I must ask you, in the interest of the case, to make known the object of his visit more plainly,” he said at length.

Mr. Mervyn look annoyed.

“It was entirely a private matter, upon which he desired an interview. I cannot see what it has to do with the case in point,” he replied, rather testily.

Mr. Heathcote looked grave.

“That must be left to the decision of the jury, Mr. Mervyn. As far as I am concerned, I must say that I think it of the greatest consequence that we should have every particular. Of course, I am sorry to intrude upon your private affairs,

but justice requires it. I think I am giving the opinion of the jury in this matter ? ”

He said the last words interrogatively, as he glanced around him. The jury gave a low murmur of assent.

“ The deceased ”—Mr. Mervyn paused, then went on, uttering his words rapidly, as though anxious to get them over—“ The deceased came to see me as a suitor to my daughter : came to make a formal offer for her hand, in fact.”

“ Was your interview a satisfactory one ? ”

“ Not altogether. I refused his suit for private reasons of my own.”

“ Was your decision given as a final one ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Was deceased—you must forgive me for any interference on so private and personal a matter, Mr. Mervyn, as I told you before, this is a very bad business, and we must do our best to get at the bottom of the mystery—was deceased visibly affected by your refusal ? ”

“ He appeared—er—disappointed.”

“ Nothing more ? ”

“ Well, I was called away in the middle of our-

interview; my wife was with him till he left the house, perhaps her evidence would be of more importance on that point."

"Is she here?"

"She is waiting for me in the village. I will send for her, if you like."

"Thank you."

Evidently glad to be released from further cross-questioning, Mr. Mervyn hurried away, accompanied by the clerk of the court.

The look of haughty superciliousness deepened on Mrs. Mervyn's face as she caught sight of her husband signing to her from the door of the inn. She closed her book as the carriage drew up, and threw off the fur rug which enveloped her. In her rich dress and gorgeously plumed bonnet, her costly furs and delicately gloved hands, she looked strangely out of place amid the homely surroundings of the little country inn. She passed along with her usual stately step to the room where the inquest was being held, not a muscle of her face relaxed from its calm, cold look of utter indifference—not a movement visible in the folded hands.

She bowed coldly to the coroner, and to one or two of the jury whom she knew, then took the chair placed for her, and waited in silence for Mr. Heathcote to speak.

“Mrs. Mervyn, we have sent for you to ask you one or two questions which your husband was unable to answer,” began the coroner, leaning his elbows on the table and placing his hands finger-tip to finger-tip, while he glanced over his spectacles at the proud, immovable face of this richly-dressed dame before him.

Mrs. Mervyn bowed—a look of surprise taking the place of the unconcern in her face.

“When the deceased, John Raynor, called upon your husband on the day upon which he was last seen alive, he came, I understand, as a suitor for the hand of your second daughter. Your husband has given us the particulars of the interview up to a certain time, when he was called away. You, I believe, remained with deceased till he left?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask what passed between you in your husband’s absence?”

Mrs. Mervyn lifted her eyes, and looked steadily at the coroner.

“Am I obliged to answer that question?”

“Certainly. In the interests of justice, we must have every particular which may lead to the solution of this sad and terrible mystery. You, my dear madam, will surely not refuse to aid us to the best of your ability?”

“Certainly not; but it is rather hard for *our* private affairs to be dragged into court,” Mrs. Mervyn replied, a frown puckering her brows.

Then seeing that the coroner waited for her answer, she went on, speaking in cold, hard tones.

“When my husband left us that day, Mr. Raynor attacked me, as to the reason for our refusal to let him marry our daughter. I told him that we had other views for our girls, that I did not consider his social position was”—

She paused. Mr. Heathcote smiled to himself.

“I have always heard the deceased gentleman spoken of as a wealthy landowner,” he said.

Again Mrs. Mervyn looked at him with her cold, grey eyes.

“Wealth is not everything,” she said, calmly;

“besides, I have other views for my second daughter. I told Mr. Raynor so, and that I wished her to have a season in London, where she would have opportunities of judging whether—but this does not concern you, of course. I will merely add that I distinctly gave Mr. Raynor to understand, in as few words as possible, that his suit was unwelcome, and after a most hasty and uncalled-for reply (which, of course, now that he is dead, poor fellow, I feel bound to overlook) he went away, and I have not seen him since.”

Mrs. Mervyn looked down upon her lavender kid gloves, with a gentle sigh.

“Has your daughter seen him since?”

“No. He wrote her a letter, which she gave me to read—merely informing her of my—of *our* decision, and bidding her farewell for the present.”

“Have you that letter now, Mrs. Mervyn?”

“Certainly not; I destroyed it the morning my daughter gave it me to read.”

The coroner frowned.

“That is a pity,” he said, slowly. “Did you destroy it with your daughter’s consent?”

“No; she is unaware of my having done so.”

“Ah!”

The coroner drummed his fingers on the table in perplexed meditation.

“I should like to ask your daughter a few questions, Mrs. Mervyn; can I see”—

Mrs. Mervyn rose hastily from her seat, a red flush of emotion on her calm face.

“She is ill in bed—she could tell you nothing! Pray do not distress her by bringing up this wretched affair!”

She spoke eagerly, almost pleadingly—her mother’s heart breaking through her proud reserve.

“You are sure she cannot tell us anything more than you have said?”

“I am certain.”

“Then we will waive her evidence for the present; later we may have occasion to call for it. Thank you, Mrs. Mervyn, for your information.”

The coroner rose from his seat, and himself attended the lady to the door, bowing her out, as though she had been an empress.

“Call Mr. Robertson,” he said, sharply, to the officer, as he came back.

In a few minutes the schoolmaster entered. He was to all intents and purposes a very disinterested witness—his manner calm and courteous, not a cloud upon the handsome, Spanish-looking face. He told what he had to say clearly and concisely. He had last seen Mr. Raynor on the evening of Miss Mervyn's wedding day. He (Mr. Robertson) had overtaken an acquaintance upon the road leading from Shanklin to Grayling, and as they were walking along Mr. Raynor had passed them in his dog-cart, and had given this acquaintance a lift, he being too fatigued to travel any further. It was about ten o'clock at night.

“Did Mr. Raynor take your friend home with him ? ” asked the coroner, abruptly.

“Not that I know of. I—I have not met my friend since.”

Mr. Robertson then went on to say that the next day he had been walking in the Wildash woods, and had seen two gentlemen in front of him, whom he had not recognised at the time, but on his making a chance observation to Miss Bottomly, a young lady living at Grayling, whom he had met in the wood, she had told him that it.

was Mr. Raynor and Captain Macgregor. She had also said they were quarrelling, but he (Mr. Robertson) did not think it likely, as they always appeared such firm friends.

“Humph,” was all the remark the coroner made, but he took up the little match-box, and looked at it again with increased interest.

“In spite of the jealousy which was said to exist between them,” added the schoolmaster, after a pause, a sinister smile curling the thin lips under his moustache.

Mr. Heathcote looked up quickly.

“Jealousy of what, or whom?” he asked.

“Of Miss Mervyn, I believe,” the witness answered, coolly.

“Is Captain Macgregor also a suitor of the young lady’s?”

“I do not know. I only go by hearsay.”

Mr. Robertson’s evidence did not last long, but at its close the coroner’s face was very thoughtful.

“We had better call Miss Bottomly now,” he said, as the schoolmaster left the room, “her evidence may lead to some solution of the mystery; and that must bring our proceedings to a close

for to-day. Captain Macgregor will be telegraphed for in the meantime."

After some little delay, Miss Bottomly made her appearance. She looked pale and frightened, but tried to assume her usual off-hand flippancy of manner as she took the seat which the coroner indicated, and glanced suspiciously round her.

" You knew Mr. Raynor ? "

" Yes, slightly."

" You were on speaking terms ? "

" Yes. "

" When did you last see him ? "

" On the day after Miss Mervyn's wedding. Let me see, last Wednesday, this day week."

" Where were you when you met him ? "

" I was at the top of Wildash wood, sitting in the place called the Pilgrim's Rest. Mr. Raynor passed with Captain Macgregor."

" Did he speak to you ? "

" No, only bowed. Captain Macgregor said it was a fine day, and they passed on."

" Were they engaged in conversation ? "

" Yes ; they were talking loudly and angrily."

" Quarrelling ? "

The coroner put the question so eagerly that Miss Bottomly looked at him in astonishment.

“I never said so,” she remarked, amiably.

“But you inferred it. Now, I wish to ask you, Miss Bottomly, as a clever, sensible young lady” (the witness bridled), “do you think they *were* quarrelling?”

“They had every appearance of it.”

“Can you remember anything in particular of the conversation which gave you that impression? Please try and recollect.”

“Mr. Raynor asked Mr. Macgregor if he took him for a fool; and his reply was, ‘I think you are *worse* than a fool.’”

“Did you hear anything more?”

“No; they passed on then.”

“And you heard nothing more at all while you were in the woods—no shots or cries?”

Again Miss Bottomly looked surprised.

“No,” she said; “I heard nothing at all.”

“Can you form any conjecture as to the cause of the quarrel between Mr. Raynor and Captain Macgregor?”

Mary Bottomly considered a moment, drawing

an imaginary figure on the ground with the end of her parasol ; then she said, hesitatingly—

“ People say there was jealousy between them.”

Mr. Heathcote put the same question that he had done to Mr. Robertson.

“ Jealously of what or whom ? ”

Miss Bottomly simpered, and kept her eyes on the ground.

“ One cannot tell. There are several nice-looking girls in these parts, the Miss Mervyns and Miss Leslies. People say they are all ready to jump at an eligible offer.”

There was malice in Miss Bottomly’s tones. The coroner, accustomed to the various moods and characters of witnesses, noticed it.

“ Thank you, Miss Bottomly ; you have very kindly told us all we wish to know. That will do for the present.”

The excitement in the village of Grayling was great when it was known that the inquest was adjourned till the day but one following, to allow of Captain Macgregor being summoned, and for the procuring of further evidence.

The twilight was deepening over the land, and

fast giving place to the shades of evening, when the crowd round the little inn, and the scattered groups congregated in and about the village, slowly dispersed to their respective homes. The coroner and jury had taken their departure ; the latter conversing in low, eager tones as they walked down the village street, objects of awe and reverence to the youth of Grayling, congregated round the cottage doors to watch the "quality" pass.

In the little bar parlour of the "Grayling Arms" Mr. Robertson stood talking to the barmaid, a cigar between his lips, a small glass of cognac in his hand.

"And you say they will take him to the Folly to-night?" he was saying, in low tones.

"Yes ; leastways, that was what I 'eard. It do seem 'ard as we should be 'avin' a corpse 'ere two nights. All I know is *I* won't stop if *he* do." And Miss Tibbs tossed her long ringlets in virtuous indignation. "The coffin is a-comin' an' a 'earse, and they're goin' to take un reight away, thank goodness ! I didn't never live at a 'otel before where there was this sort of a kick hup. If I'd

a knowd it, caravans shouldn't 'a draw'd me 'ere nuther!"

"I daresay it won't happen again," the schoolmaster said soothingly. "I suppose they are quite sure he is dead?" he went on, thoughtfully.

Miss Tibbs stared.

"Good sakes aloive, Mister Robertson! don't be skeerin' of a body loike that! Why, 'e's been in the wood ever so long, let alone them marks as must ha' killed un right off."

"How do you know he had been in the wood a long time?" asked the schoolmaster, fixing his large, melancholy-looking eyes on the girl. She turned quite white under their gaze.

"Lor! Mr. Robertson! that's what *they* said," jerking her thumb over her shoulder in the direction of the next room, where the inquest was held. "I don't know nothin' aboout un."

Mr. Robertson laughed—a disagreeable laugh.

"That is all the better for *you*," he said, putting down his glass, and sauntering away out of the little bar, and down the stone steps into the village street.

Miss Tibbs looked over the blind after him.

"Hif you wasn't schoolmaster, my foine gentleman, I'd ha' said you'd done it yerself," she remarked, astutely.

Night was closing over the peaceful-looking village. Already dark shadows might be seen looming over the surrounding scenery, enveloping in their dim mysterious blackness the far-off woodlands and undulating plains.

Lights gleamed from the unshuttered windows of the neighbouring cottages, and far away they twinkled like stars from a distant lonely house among the trees. The sky was one cloudless deepening blue, with here and there a pale star glimmering in its vast expanse; while farther out, where the sun had sunk to rest beneath his ocean bed, the few last golden rays still lingered. The moon had not yet risen to glad with her silvery rays, the darkening earth; the shadows would deepen yet more before, like some fair beneficent spirit of the night, her waning form would

Roll through the dark blue depths.

The schoolmaster stood just outside the "Grayling Arms," looking up at the fast-darkening sky.

"It is like my life," he murmured, "ever seeming to get more and more dark and shadowed."

"Good-evening, sir."

Mr. Robertson started at the voice so close to him, then, as he recognized the burly form of the landlord of the little inn, he returned the salutation rather curtly.

"I suppose you've been at the inquest, sir?"

"Yes," shortly.

"A good thing for *our* trade, sir, is inquests. Why, I've done more in the retail business this last two days than I do in a week other times. 'Tain't often as a small place like this gets a murder, sir, no sich luck; but it's astonishin' 'ow a village 'ill get hup d'rectly ter be quite famous-like, what wi' the papers and folks a' comin' to look round; an' they all 'as their glasses, hevery man jack on um. Aye, it's a good thing for a 'otel, sir, is a hinquest!"

Jonathan Styles stuck his thumbs in the arm-holes of his plaid waistcoat, and beat a complacent tatoo on his broad chest.

"It is a pity about poor Mr. Raynor though," Robertson remarked, thoughtfully.

“Aye, sir, 'tis a pity indeed ; for er were a civil-spoke young gentleman, werry much so. Little did I think when I see un last, a ridin' by on that bay mare o' 'is, that I should ha' made a pot o' money by 'is dead body ; but sich his life.”

“I suppose they will bury him to-morrow ?”

“To-morrer at 'alf past twelve o'clock punctual. They're a goin' to move un hup to the Folly ter-night.”

“I wonder who murdered him ?” Mr. Robertson remarked after a pause.

Mr. Styles whistled softly a few bars of “Old Dog Tray” before he answered—

“Well, sir, 'tain't fer *you* nor *me* nor *anybody* to say. ‘Murder will out’ they say ; an' I daresay the chap as done it will swing for 't in the long run.”

“Yes, I suppose so. Good-night, Styles.”

“Good-night t'ye, sir !”

The schoolmaster took his way down the village street, past the little general shop, now brilliantly lighed up with two tallow candles stuck in ginger-beer bottles, and on towards the post office. He paused a moment to look at a gay-coloured pro-

gramme of a concert to be given in a neighbouring small town, on which his own name stood conspicuous for two or three songs. A low laugh came from his lips as he read it; then he turned and went into the post office.

Mrs. Pipkin was more morose than usual; she returned the schoolmaster's "Good-evening" with an almost inaudible grunt, and threw him the stamps he asked for as though he were her greatest enemy. The post-mistress was not partial to Mr. Robertson; she considered him stuck-up and above his station, and distinctly refused to be cajoled by any of his "soft-soap," as she called it.

"Well, Mrs. Pipkin, so Grayling is going to be famous."

Mrs. Pipkin gave an ominous sniff.

"If findin' people murdered in woods is bein' famous, it certainly are," she remarked, tartly.

"You ought to think how it will increase your trade," he remarked, lightly.

"*My* trade! It won't do no good to *my* trade; there won't be a 'a'porth more stamps bought, because some villain has been an' killed his fellow-creature," she said, severely.

“ I wonder who did it ? ”

The schoolmaster looked keenly at the woman as he spoke.

“ Taint no business o’ mine who did it. All I know is if they catches the brute, I hopes as I’ll be there to see him hung,” she said, vindictively.

“ Did you like Mr. Raynor ? ”

“ That’s nuther ’ere nor there ; ’e were a civil-spoken young gent, as minded ‘is hown business.”

The hint was not to be mistaken. Mr. Robertson smiled to himself as he wished the cross old woman good-evening and took his departure.

“ So far so good,” was his strange remark to himself as he passed into the darkness. But all the same, there came a wave of terrible thoughts over his heart, almost stifling him in their sudden force ; while in the sky above him, and in the faintly twinkling stars, he seemed to see those ominous words, “ Vengeance is mine ; *I will repay, saith the Lord.*”

Mr. Robertson lodged with an old couple who lived in a pretty cottage at the end of the village.

Thither he bent his steps, trying to collect his thoughts and drive away the demon of terror which now so often seemed to deprive him of sense and reason. The night wind blew in his face, making him shudder. He almost fancied he could hear the roar of the storm-tossed ocean, and feel the pelting rain. But he must not think of it—not yet, not yet !

Presently he overtook a solitary figure, the figure of a woman. He was about to pass her with a courteous good-night, when she suddenly addressed him.

“ If you please, sir, are you one o’ the gentlemen as was ‘avin’ the inquest up yonder? ”

The schoolmaster replied in the negative.

“ Did you wish to see them? ” he asked.

“ Yes, sir. Leastways, I’ve got somethin’ I found in the wood this arternoon, as I were a pickin’ up sticks an’ sich like, fer to make me a bit o’ fire. Coals is that dear, and ”—

“ What was it? Tell me *quick*! What was it? ”

He grasped her suddenly by the arm. It was so dark she could not see how white and ghastly his face had grown.

The woman suppressed a shriek, and drew a step from him. He instantly recovered himself, and added, in his usual tones—

“ You startled me. I am so interested to know who could have committed that terrible murder; go on with your story. What did you find ? ”

“ Well, sir,” went on the woman, reassured by his manner, “ it were this way. I were in the woods this arternoon, as I said”—

“ Yes, yes,” hastily; “ picking up sticks. Go on.”

“ An’ afore I come home I thowt as I’d go an’ look at the place where the gentleman was murdered. My Jim had towld me where er were, cos he heard from Dawson. So I goes, feeling werry skeered like; an’ when I foinds the tree I were ready to faint, an’ were that dazed as I dropped all my bundle o’ sticks higgledy-piggledy (as the sayin’ is) down on the ground. Deary me ! I were in a awful state, cos I knew I wasn’t allowed to get them twigs at all, and I hasted to pick em up. Well, right under all the leaves an’ pieces o’ fern roots and brambles, I found this, an’ I didn’t know what ter do wi’ em, cos I don’t want to get

nobody into trouble; but the gentleman as was inmurdered 'ave been werry good to my Jim, as is one o' the stable boys at the Folly, so at fust I thinks ter myself shall I take it an' hide it, an' say no more. An' then I were fearful I might git found out; and I thowt as I'd gie this ter one o' the jury gentlemen, an' ask 'im what I'd better do."

She drew from under her shawl a walking stick, and handed it to the schoolmaster. Robertson took it eagerly and felt the handle all over, for it was too dark to see.

"Who does it belong to?" he whispered hoarsely.

"That's more nor I can say, sir. 'Tis a queer kind o' a stick too, wi' a ivory 'andle, like a skull's 'ead. Ghastly, *I* calls it."

"Shall I take it for you and give it to the coroner? I shall be seeing him the day after to-morrow," Robertson said, kindly.

The woman hesitated.

"Well, yer see, sir, if I thowt as 'ow it wouldn't do no harm," she began—

"Rest assured no harm will come to *you*. You

see we have no clue to the person who has committed this murder, and every one is bound to do all they can to find out about it. You are *bound* to give up this stick, as you found it near the very place where the crime was committed."

Mr. Robertson spoke decidedly, almost sternly.

"Very well, sir; you can take it an' give it ter the gentleman. Only, sir, if yer wouldn't say as how I were a takin' they sticks"—

"I will not say anything to get you into trouble; of that you may be quite certain. Now, you must tell me your name."

"Tibbles, sir; Mary Ann Tibbles. My husband works along o' Miss Leslie, as gardener. We lives up at Deerham; last house in the village, sir."

"Very good. I am the schoolmaster here."

Mrs. Tibbles started.

"I thought I knowed yer voice, sir; but I ain't very good at rememberin' people, an' it's that dark as I couldn't see yer face."

After a few more words to the effect that he would make her story good with the coroner, the schoolmaster went on his way.

Arrived at his own abode, he hurried into his

sitting-room and bolted himself in ; then he sat down in front of the fire and proceeded to examine the walking stick. It was of ebony, with, as Mrs. Tibbles had described it, an ivory top shaped like a skull. There were the empty sockets, the wide-open grinning mouth, with a red tongue just visible between the teeth—a ghastly-looking object. A silver band was round its neck, fastened at the back with a small silver knob. Turning it about in his fingers, Robertson accidentally pressed this collar-button, when lo and behold ! the thing opened a pair of large, pathetic-looking eyes, and thrust out its red tongue in mockery at the horrified gazer.

With a cry, the schoolmaster dropped the stick as though it had been a red-hot poker. Great drops of perspiration stood on his brow.

“Heavens ! the face of Rolton !” he exclaimed, in terrified accents ; “of the man I vowed to kill, and”—

He gazed wildly round, gasping for breath ; but after a few moments, becoming calmer, he once more took up the stick, and without looking again at the ghastly handle, opened the drawer of an

old-fashioned bureau which stood in a recess by the fireplace, and thrust it hurriedly inside. Then going to the door, he unbolted and opened it; and after listening intently for some moments, returned to the fireplace and rang the bell.

“I will have my tea now, Mrs. Ransom,” he said to the little old woman who came in answer to the summons. “What is the time? my watch has stopped.”

“Twenty minutes to seven, sir,” she replied in thin, cracked tones. “Beg pardon, sir, but have they found un?” she added, wistfully.

“Found who?” sharply.

“Why, sir, him as murdered the good young gentleman.”

“No, nor ever *will* find him,” was the schoolmaster’s reply, as he stooped down to unlace his boots. “Bring me my slippers, please.”

Mr. Robertson ate his tea in thoughtful mood, never glancing at the daily London paper, with which it was his custom to enliven his solitude at this meal. At last he pushed away his plate, swallowed his last mouthful of toast, drank his tea, and rose, we will hope, refreshed. Cros-

sing the room to a writing table, his own property, and the most modern-looking piece of furniture in the place, he seized a sheet of paper and wrote hurriedly—

“If you meant what you said in the wood the day before yesterday, and have forgiven me, meet me in the same place to-morrow afternoon; I have something of importance to tell you. I hear Grayling is becoming famous.

“G. R.”

He next folded up the letter, sealed and directed it; then put on his hat and went and posted it himself. The address on it was “Miss Bottomly, The Elms, Grayling.”

## CHAPTER VII.

“BY WHOSE HAND?”

GRAYLING certainly had become famous. The report of the murder and inquest had got into the London papers, and newspaper reporters and other members of the press had come down post-haste to get as many particulars as possible. Artists connected with the leading illustrated papers were busily engaged in taking sketches of the Priory, the Wildash woods, and even of the “Grayling Arms,” to Jonathan Styles’s unbounded delight and satisfaction. His faith in the efficacy of inquests as a money-making concern was stronger than ever, and the position of one of the crowned heads of Europe was not more noble or responsible than his at this present time—for had he not four reporters, and two artists, staying at the inn, and was it not from *him* they gleaned most of the information about the neighbourhood, which afterwards appeared side by side with

certain sketches in the *Graphic* and *Illustrated News*?

The Folly was full of friends and relatives of the deceased owner, who had come to attend the funeral, and who were moving heaven and earth to discover the murderer of their kinsman.

An examination of the deceased's papers led to nothing which could in any wise confirm the first suspicion, that he had committed suicide; neither was there any clue which could suggest the existence of an enemy. Among his private correspondence was found a letter from Captain Macgregor, bearing reference to some person unknown, who appeared to be unfriendly in his relations to both. This was set aside for examination, together with the dead man's diary, cheque-book, and a letter or two from Janet Mervyn.

The effect of the news of John Raynor's death upon Captain Macgregor seemed almost more than the loss of a mere friend would warrant. His face was pale and haggard, he looked years older, and his usual bright, frank expression and lazy nonchalance seemed quite to have deserted him.

The telegram summoning him to Grayling to be

present at the inquest, had followed him to Aldershot, and he had hurried at once to London, and from thence home, his application for leave having been readily granted in consideration of the urgency of the case.

"It might have been his brother," remarked the Colonel, in talking over the affair with Captain Macgregor's great friend, Major Ponsonby. "I never saw a fellow so cut up in my life."

"Poor Bertie! he has a warm heart—as tender as a woman's," remarked the other, sadly; "but I can't make him out just now, he seems quite seedy and down."

"In love, perhaps," said Colonel Delorme, with a sneer.

He was a bachelor, and expressed the greatest contempt for women—so much so, that he was never known to accept any invitations for shooting or hunting where there were ladies belonging to the household.

"Maybe," replied the Major, a gleam of fun coming into his grey eyes. "He always said it would be a 'toss up' between *you* and himself which would become a Benedict first."

“Pshaw!” said the Colonel, angrily, as he turned away, followed by a loud burst of laughter from his brother officer.

The sad mystery of the murdered squire formed the principal topic of conversation throughout the whole village of Grayling—such an event had never taken place within the memory of the oldest inhabitant, and each and all waited in awe-struck dread for the result of the second day’s meeting of the coroner and jury, for rumour went that certain proofs were forthcoming, which would go far to convict the person who was supposed to have done the deed. Who that person was, did not transpire, the most curious and gossip-loving could not ferret it out.

Over the household at Abbott’s Home Farm an ominous shadow seemed to have fallen. Notwithstanding her mother’s stern reproof, and her father’s kindly words of sympathy, Janet Mervyn shut herself away from the family circle, and refused to be comforted. With burning, tearless eyes, and a sad, wan face, from which every particle of colour had fled, she would sit for hours gazing into the fire, a hard, dry sob breaking at

intervals from her aching heart ; or at other times, seized with a fit of restlessness, she would walk up and down the room, muttering to herself, like one bereft of her senses.

Mrs. Mervyn was at her wits' end.

"If I could only get her away!" she would say, irritably. "Caroline would have had her, only she is at the Duncombe's. I wish I had let Janet go last week, when she had the chance."

But at the bare mention of her going from home Janet turned wildly upon her mother—

"Do you want to kill me outright, mamma?" she cried, vehemently. "I tell you I shall *die* if you don't let me be!"

Then she took it into her head she must see Captain Macgregor, and on the day after his return home, she prevailed on her father to send for him. Mrs. Mervyn was displeased beyond measure, but dared not thwart her daughter in her present strange mood.

So Captain Macgregor came, greatly wondering. His astonishment increased, however, as he noted the ravages which distress and sorrow had made upon the girl's bright, pretty face. She looked

like the ghost of her former self, with the large, sad eyes and white trembling lips.

“Captain Macgregor,” she said, after he had taken her hand, and essayed some word of greeting and sympathy, “you were with him, with Mr. Raynor—before—he—he died; tell me what could have happened to him! Sometimes I have such dreadful thoughts—he seems to come to me in my dreams, and say he—he—killed himself because I was false to him!”—she clasped her hands convulsively together, and the gasping, tearless sobs shook her slight frame as though they would rend her in pieces.

Bertie Macgregor started.

“He did not—kill himself?” he asked, slowly, looking keenly at the girl, who seemed to him to have taken leave of her senses.

“That is what I fear so much; but they say,” catching his arm, and fixing her startled eyes upon his face, “that some one murdered him.”

“Yes, I know it,” he replied, gently.

“Captain Macgregor, who could have done it? Who could have taken a life that was devoted to doing good? They *could not!*”

“ I cannot tell you, Miss Mervyn,” Bertie said, sorely puzzled at the girl’s strange words and manner.

Then he went on to describe his last meeting with her lover, their conversation and parting, Janet listening intently, with her eyes fixed upon a ring she was pulling off and upon her finger.

“ Did he speak of me ? ” she said, at last.

“ Yes.”

“ And did he tell you my parents would not sanction our engagement ? ”

“ He told me everything.”

“ He—he did not say I was false, and tell you he would kill himself, because I would not marry him ? ”

“ Miss Mervyn,” Captain Macgregor spoke gently, but every word he uttered carried conviction to his companion’s tortured heart, “ John Raynor was not the man to commit suicide; as surely as I stand here before you now, the hand that killed him was not his own.”

Janet raised her eyes to his.

“ Thank you. You have taken one load from my heart. He is dead, I shall never see him

again in this world, but he died a martyr's death, and I may hope to meet him in Heaven. Oh, Captain Macgregor! if you only knew how I have tortured myself with the thought that he had taken his own life, and that *I* was the cause! Now I think I shall lie down and die too, for I am tired and weary, and I cannot live without him. If you had lost your—any one you cared for, as I cared for Jack—you would know how hard"—

Janet stopped, Captain Macgregor had snatched away his hand, which in her gratitude the girl had seized in hers, and turned away, a heavy sigh escaping his lips.

There was silence. Then after a few more words of sympathy, spoken in low, hurried tones, Captain Macgregor bade her farewell.

"If only Gwendoline were here, she would help me," sighed Janet. "Poor Gwendoline!"

"Lady Sylvester is, surely, not entitled to *that* appellation," Macgregor remarked, bitterly. "She has won everything this life can give, what more would you have?"

“ Happiness,” replied Janet, briefly ; and then her visitor abruptly took his leave, and she was left alone—to brood over her misery, and long for the rest of the grave that she might join her murdered lover.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### GUILTY.

“BEETIE, do come and speak to Donald. He has been summoned to attend the inquest, and he is so irate and insulted, nobody can do anything with him ; he declares he won’t go. Do just see if you can reason with him.”

Miss Macgregor met her brother as he sauntered into the hall from the garden, her voice full of vexation and concern.

Captain Macgregor stopped short, a look of surprise coming into his face.

“What on earth can they want *him* for ?” he exclaimed, wonderingly.

“I cannot imagine ; but of course, he must go. Mother has talked to him and I have lectured him, but it is no use. He will persist in saying that it is an insult to the family.”

Captain Macgregor took the cigar from his lips and laughed outright.

“ So that is it, is it ? The old grievance. Where is he ? I must go and talk him over.”

“ In his pantry, I believe ; looking like a caged lion,” Miss Macgregor replied, passing up the staircase.

“ Mary ! ”

She stopped at the sound of her brother’s voice calling to her.

“ Is the governor coming back to-night ? ”

“ I believe so. He said he would telegraph for the carriage to meet him, but we have not heard,” she replied.

Then after waiting a few moments for further remarks and hearing none, she continued her way along the corridor.

Captain Macgregor found the old butler busily employed in taking an inventory of the plate from a paper in his hand—his usual resort as a means of calming himself in any times of agitation or “ upset.” A young footman was assisting him, and acting as audience to a series of muttered ex-postulations with which Donald varied his business in hand.

“ Noo then, Robert, ye ha left oot thae moostard

spunes an' thae figured salts. I hae tauld ye sae aft tae coont em a' togither ! Aye, mon, but gin her thocht her wad hae tae gie speech tae thae family affairs, her wad hae gane back tae ould Scotland agin afoore this ! Nae, nae, tha's mair nae twa doozen o' thae large foorks. Coont em a' agin, mon ! coont em a' agin ! An' tae hae tae say afoore sic a lot a' fules, thot ma name's Donald MacAlister, I would na doo't ! Nae, nae, auld Donald's nae daft, her suld "—

Here he caught sight of the Captain, and stopped short.

"Robert, go and tell Walters I shall want the dog-cart at five o'clock this evening, and say to Jones that I will have my dress clothes packed. I am going to dine at Sandown. Now, Donald,"—as the footman retired—"what is all this about their wanting you at the inquest ? "

"Hech ! Mr. Bertie, an' it's hersel' as cannna tell ye thot. Tae think as her suld hae lived tae see thae day as the Macgregors o' Macgregor suld hae been sent for tae speak tae a lot o' fules at a inn ! "

"But you see *I* don't mind going, Donald, so

why should you ? They only ask people to tell all they know, in order to find out who has murdered poor Mr. Raynor. Everybody who saw him lately had to give evidence," the Captain said soothingly.

Donald shook his head.

" Nae, nae, sir ; it's their idle curiosity as wadken aboot the ways o' thae gentry. Weel I mind thae time we had thae poochers up, and thae lawyer he asked her hoo much siller Sir Randolph kept i' tha hoose, as if it wad do *them* any gude tae ken ! Nae, nae, says I, thot I'll not tell ; her's nae fule, is na ould Donald ! "

He chuckled softly to himself. The Captain looked in despair.

" You will have to go, Donald, nevertheless," he said, calmly.

" Nae, nae, Mr. Bertie ; the laird has na said."

" But *I* have. In my father's absence *I* am master here, and *I* tell you to go."

The Captain spoke sternly. Then he turned and walked away before the astonished butler had time to say a word in expostulation.

The inquest was resumed at two o'clock, as had

been previously announced. Several witnesses who had not been called on the former occasion were now examined ; notably the woman who had found the stick, a farmer with whom Mr. Raynor had made an appointment for the very day of his murder ; the railway officials, who testified to the despatch of the portmanteau and to Captain Macgregor's departure for London by a late train that same evening, and one or two servants at the Priory.

The deceased's bankers wrote, in answer to enquiries made by his relatives, asserting that a few days previous to that of the murder, deceased had presented a cheque for a large amount made payable to himself, which they had cashed. Neither this money nor any receipt for its payment could be found. Mr. Raynor's cheque-book contained the item, but it was simply entered as "self, £500."

The mystery appeared to deepen with every fresh evidence, and no clue which might lead to the discovery of the murderer could be found. It was very unlikely Mr. Raynor would carry the money about with him ; and had the crime been committed for the sake of robbery, his watch and

chain and the silver match-box would have been taken also. This was the opinion of coroner and jury alike.

And now Captain Macgregor was called. He entered the room with a demeanour which threw little light upon his feelings with regard to the murder. Except for his pale face and weary, gloomy expression, he appeared calm and lazily nonchalant as usual. He gave his evidence collectively and concisely.

Deceased was a friend of his—a dear and esteemed friend. Had known him since they were at Eton together, and had seen him during the intervals when he (Captain Macgregor) was at the Hall ; which intervals were, however, few and far between. Never remembered to have quarrelled with him during all that time. On the day when John Raynor was last seen alive, had met him coming from Mr. Mervyn's, and had walked with him through the wood on his way back to Horsham Dale.

Here the cross-examination was begun by the coroner.

“ Had you any misunderstanding with deceased on that occasion ? ”

Captain Macgregor started, and looked up quickly.

“Misunderstanding?” he repeated.

“Yes; you did not have any words—quarrel, in fact?”

“I have told you that I never quarrelled with him during all the years I knew him,” was the calm reply.

Mr. Heathcote considered a moment, his eyes fixed on the immovable face of the witness.

“May I ask what was the subject of your conversation that day?”

The Captain flushed a little.

“I do not think that out of respect to the memory of my friend, I am at liberty to say.”

“But we must waive all considerations of that sort in a case like this, Captain Macgregor. Kindly do me the favour to reply to my question.”

“Pardon me, I cannot comply with your request, the matter was entirely a private one, and related to a great disappointment which my deceased friend had suffered that morning.”

“Is it true”—Mr. Heathcote glanced at his notes—“that in the course of conversation the de-

ceased asked if you considered him a fool, and that your reply was you thought him worse than a fool ? ”

“ It is quite true.”

“ We are then to suppose that you were at high words ? ”

“ Deceased was not pleased at something I said.”

“ Ah ! ” The coroner smacked his lips as who should say, “ We are coming to it at last.” “ Was it about Miss Mervyn ? ”

“ It was.”

“ Were there any feelings of rivalry (excuse my straightforwardness) between deceased and yourself ? ”

Captain Macgregor looked surprised.

“ Not that I am aware of,” he replied, quietly.

“ One question more. Do you know to whom this belongs ? ” holding up the ebony and ivory walking stick.

“ It is mine.”

“ Are you aware when and where it was found ? ”

“ No,” calmly.

“Were you using it when you took that last walk in the woods with deceased ?”

“I might have been; I cannot remember.”

“This is also yours, I believe ?”

Captain Macgregor glanced nonchalantly at the little silver match-box in the coroner’s hand.

“Yes, that is mine.”

“That will do for the present, Captain Macgregor. May I ask you to remain here in case we may require your presence again ?”

The Captain bowed and walked from the room, erect, handsome—a true son of Mars.

“Well, I am puzzled,” remarked Mr Heathcote. “Gentlemen, what is your opinion ?”

“We are not prepared to say yet,” was the answer by the foreman of the jury.

The next witness was old Donald, looking morose and apathetic.

“Your name ?” said the coroner, kindly.

“Donald MacAlister,” gruffly.

“You are butler to Sir Randolph Macgregor, I believe ?”

“I am thot.”

“Do you remember the day after Miss Mervyn’s wedding, and what happened ? ”

“Aye, I mind it—it were Miss Mary’s birthday, an’ her wint tae Shanklin tae sae thae blue sae ; but, aye, it’s nae sae bonnie as our ain Arbroath.”

“What time did Captain Macgregor go to London that day ? ”

“At ten o’ thae clock at e’en, the young laird suld journey a’ the nicht.”

“Did you notice anything peculiar in his manner that day ? ”

Donald looked perplexed.

“Did her whhat ? ” he asked, inquiringly.

“Did you notice if he seemed sad or unhappy ? ”

“He did ! he did ! ” cried the old man, in eager, excited tones. “Her hae kenned thae young laird frae a cheeld, her loves hin well, an’ her thocht her suld hae deed o’ greetin’ at his ghaistly look an’ sad ways—he wad sit an’ groan, an’ dree his wierd a’ alone, as thae sayin’ is, a’ alone, a’ alone ! ”

“Did he seem more sad the day he went away ? ”

“Nae sae vary, nae sae daft-like, boot sorrowfu’ for a’ that.”

“Did Captain Macgregor and Mr. Raynor see a good deal of each other when the captain was at home ? ”

“Aye, they did that—Mr. Bertie were ower fond o’ thae young squire.”

“Were they great friends ? ”

“Aye, like brithers, thae twa on ‘em.”

“Did you ever know there was a jealousy between them ? ”

“Nae, I dinna ken what ye mean.” Old Donald looked puzzled.

“It is said that they were both in love with the same young lady, Miss Mervyn.”

Mr. Heathcote was getting tired of this cross-examination, the witness was either unwilling or else really unable to say what he was wanted to—consequently the coroner’s tones were sharp.

“Hech ! ye ken mair aboot my maister’s affairs then her do hersel’, Mister Coroner ! ” ejaculated the old man, smiling broadly. “An’ which on ‘em wad the young leddie be goin’ tae be gudewife tae ? ”

"That has nothing to do with it," said the exasperated coroner. "You may go."

The excitement increased without the inn doors as tidings came from time to time of the result of each witness's testimony. Long did the jury and coroner consult together. Captain Macgregor was recalled, also several of the others ; and now the news spread that the cross-examination of witnesses was over, and the jury engaged in the difficult task of considering their verdict.

Scarcely a single person among the waiting crowd assembled in the village street had even a suspicion that the evidence collected had been found sufficient to discover and convict the probable murderer, and a thrill of horror and amazement, almost of *fear*, passed through the mind of each listener, as the intelligence spread far and wide, that Captain Macgregor was summoned to answer at the next Winchester assizes, *for the wilful murder of John Raynor.*

## CHAPTER IX.

### BROKEN HEARTS.

IN the wide hall of Borehampton Castle, Lord Sylvestre's beautiful country seat in Blankshire, where he and his bride had settled to pass the first fortnight of their honeymoon, stands Gwendoline, listlessly drawing on her gloves—the beautiful blue eyes fixed absently upon the little basket carriage, whose frisky grey ponies stand impatiently pawing the ground, eager to be off.

There is no happiness visible upon Lady Sylvestre's face, no look of triumph or contentment—rather, indeed, might it be said that her features bear that impress of fretfulness and boredom which accompanies a *marriage de convenance*.

“Have you told his lordship the carriage is waiting?” she said, turning to a servant near her.

“Yes, my lady; his lordship will be here in a few moments,” replied the man.

Lady Sylvestre looked annoyed, and pulled so

hard at the button of her glove that it flew off. She drew the offender hastily from her hand, and gave it, with its fellow, to the footman.

“Tell Stone to send me another pair; and, ‘Tomlin,’ as the man departed, “see if the afternoon post is in yet.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Gwendoline walked to the door, and stood contemplating the fair scene of park and wooded upland, stretched in one vast panorama before her. Far away, the cathedral towers rose high and majestic above the roofs and chimneys of a neighbouring town; while farther still were soft undulating meadow lands, and the silvery winding thread of the distant river.

Lady Sylvestre was not thinking, however, of the lovely scene upon which her dreamy blue eyes were resting so intently. Her imagination saw a far different picture—a crowded ball-room, filled with the sweet fragrance of flowers, and intoxicating perfumes. She was once more listening to the soft, melodious tones of a never-to-be-forgotten voice, her hand was once more clasped in his, while from the distant orchestra came the sweet

strains of the "Dreamland" waltz, and her heart went slowly, but surely from her, into the keeping of the man she loved. A heavy sigh escaped her lips. Lord Sylvestre, coming out of the library, heard it.

"Tired of waiting, darling? I am coming now; sorry to have kept you."

He spoke hurriedly. His wife, turning at the sound of his voice, noticed how pale his face was, how hurried and nervous his manner.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing—nothing"—he hesitated. "Something I have seen in to-day's paper startled me, that is all."

He took his hat from a servant, and came to his wife's side.

"Where are you going this afternoon?" he asked, glancing with admiring love at the beautiful girl whom he worshipped so blindly.

In her rich dress of blue velvet, which made her fair face and golden hair so much more lovely by contrast with its azure hue, the plumed hat, of the becoming Gainsborough shape, crowning the shapely head and oval face, she was, indeed,

worthy of the admiration she excited in his breast. One thing was wanting—only one. If the blue eyes could have shone with tenderness, the perfect countenance have flushed with conscious pride in his approval, and answering love, nought upon earth could have surpassed her, no woman have vied with her in beauty. But the lovely face was coldly indifferent, the blue eyes beneath their drooping lids were full of preoccupied thought, and she took no notice of her husband's question.

“A penny for your thoughts,” he said, lightly touching her cheek with his finger.

Gwendoline turned away with a petulant movement of her shoulders.

“They are not worth that, and would not interest you,” she said, coldly.

“I doubt it—everything of yours *must* interest me,” he persisted; “but what are we waiting for now? I am ready.”

“I sent Tomlin to see if the post had come in. I have not heard from home this week, and am getting a little uneasy,” she replied, with rather more animation in her tones.

“Not homesick, surely, Gwen?”

Lord Sylvestre's tone was joking, but the look he gave his wife as he spoke was one of earnest scrutiny.

"No, I am not homesick," she replied, indifferently.

Then she turned eagerly to the footman, who was crossing the hall with a salver; on it were a pair of gloves and one or two letters. Gwendoline seized them eagerly, her face flushed with excitement—

"One for me, and the rest yours," she said, turning them over.

Then taking up her gloves, she began hurriedly to put them on.

"We need not keep the carriage waiting any longer," she remarked, moving towards the door. "You can drive while I read my letter, Robert."

Her tone was peremptory, not the tone of a bride speaking to her husband; but he obeyed. Every word of his beautiful wife's was law to him; he delighted to fulfil her slightest behest, so full of love was his heart for her.

Down the pleasant country road bowled the little carriage. The autumn sunshine, making

everything bright around, shone upon the rich tints of the changing foliage, upon the pale yellows, and russet browns and reds, of the oaks and copper beeches which grew on either side of their way. Lord Sylvestre's eyes were fixed upon the gleaming towers of Yorrowminster cathedral, now bathed in the golden glory of the sunlight; his wife's were fixed upon the letter which she had just opened. Suddenly her face paled, and an exclamation of horror escaped her lips. Lord Sylvestre turned to her quickly.

"Oh, Robert! listen! Mamma says John Raynor has been murdered in Wildash woods!" she exclaimed, lifting terrified eyes to her husband's face. "And Janet is ill with the fright. Did you ever hear of anything so dreadful!"

"I knew it," he replied, quietly, "it was the account of it in the paper which startled me so just before we came out. Does your mother say anything else?" anxiously.

"I have not read any farther yet," turning again to the letter, and once more there was silence.

Lord Sylvestre's eyes went back to the cathedral towers, now growing more distinct, as the carriage turned a corner of the road, and the town itself came into view. He glanced at his wife—her face had grown white and ghastly. He was about to speak, when a hand gently took the reins from him, and Gwendoline's voice, hoarse and weak, said, slowly—

“Read it.”

He took the letter, and without a glance at the pale face beside him, did her bidding.

Onward went the carriage, past the little village, with its quaint church, and the schoolhouse, from which the children were even now trooping, with mirthful voices and glad faces, freed from the restraint of tasks and bewildering sums—past pretty cottages, whose tiny gardens were ablaze with geraniums and many coloured dahlias, and through the turnpike gate which led to the outskirts of the town. Then Lord Sylvestre folded up the letter and handed it back to his wife.

“Poor Macgregor!” was all he said, but it made the quick blood mount to Lady Sylvestre's pale cheeks.

She whipped up the ponies to greater speed, and then said, calmly—

“Of course, there is some terrible mistake.”

“There must be,” her husband replied, thoughtfully. “Macgregor is not the man to commit murder in cold blood like that—the coroner must have been prejudiced. I saw the account of the murder yesterday, but did not tell you at the time. I always liked Macgregor from the first moment I saw him, even when I was such a fool as to be jealous of him,” with a half-laugh.

Gwendoline pulled up the ponies sharply on the edge of the kerbstone—so sharply, that the little carriage nearly came to grief against a lamp-post.

“Take the reins,” she said, “I—I must go into a shop”—

“Can I go for you, dear? You look quite white. My love has such a tender heart,” regarding her with wistful, adoring eyes.

Once again, as she had done before this afternoon, Lady Sylvestre turned from him petulantly.

“You can go if you like. I want some eau-de-cologne—Stone broke my large bottle this morn-

ing ; and you may get me some ‘ white rose ’ scent, if they have any.”

Anything to be alone for five minutes, freed from the presence of the man whom she had vowed before her Maker to “ love, honour, and obey till death did them part.” Gwendoline watched him as he walked along with light, buoyant step, till he disappeared into the perfumer’s shop, then she leaned back wearily, and wished she were dead. Why had she let her mother’s persuasions, her own love of wealth and position, lead her to do so great a wrong to the man who loved and trusted her ? And the man *she* loved was accused of the deadly sin of murder, would perhaps be found guilty, and die the death of a felon ! Surely it was a just punishment for her wickedness. She would never see him again now ; perhaps she had driven him mad by her marriage with Lord Sylvestre, and in his madness he had taken the life of his friend, and her sister’s lover.

Again before Gwendoline’s eyes came the fair, handsome face, the tall, graceful figure, and lazy nonchalant bearing. Only *she* of all others among

the beautiful women around her, had had the power to make the blue eyes glow with passion, the habitual rather contemptuous curl of the lips turn to tender smiles of love. Would that one blissful evening, when her presence had made him forget all but his great love, *never* fade from her mind? Would it ever come, like some spectre of the buried past, to haunt her through the long long years of her joyless life, taunting her with her perfidy to the two men who loved her so dearly?

Many a passer-by cast admiring glances at the fair occupant of the little carriage, wondering, perhaps, at the look of discontent upon the lovely face, the pathetic expression in the large blue eyes.

Lady Sylvestre was silent during the homeward drive, so silent that her husband several times turned to ask if she were tired. Not till they had turned up the avenue of stately elms leading to the castle, did she speak.

“Robert, can we not ask Janet here soon?”

“Certainly, darling, whenever you like.”

“She—she will not have to give evidence at

the—trial?" the words came in short, painful gasps, try as she might, to steady her voice.

"Most probably. The paper says that Macgregor murdered Raynor on account of jealousy—he being in love with your sister; but"—

"It is false! he"—Gwendoline caught the look of amazement on her husband's face, and checked herself—"he admired Auriol," she said, after a pause.

With the newspaper in her hand, Lady Sylvestre betook herself to her boudoir as soon as she reached home, and locked herself in. With pale cheeks and burning eyes, she read the account of the inquest from beginning to end. Then throwing the paper from her, she laid her head down upon the cushions of the couch, and broke into a passion of weeping.

"Oh, Bertie! Bertie! my heart is broken! Why did I not die before I led you to this?" she sobbed, but in the gathering misty shadows of the twilight, there came no answer of peace to her aching heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

The autumn afternoon was drawing to a close;

already the last rays of the sun were making a golden path upon the sea, and shining with slanting beams across the meadows and woodlands. Janet Mervyn sat at the window of the pretty little sitting-room, which the Miss Mervyns had converted into their own particular sanctum, and which now, in the absence of her sisters, was dedicated to her own sole use, watching the deepening shadows over hill and dale, and listening, half-dreamily, to the sounds from the farm-yard, ascending to her upon the gentle breeze.

The window was open, for it was unusually warm for October, the air being soft and balmy, and laden with the scent of the late roses, which grew in rich clusters beneath the casement. Down below in the garden the voices of the two little girls and their governess came every now and then to mingle with the half-waking dream into which Janet had gradually fallen. Miss Dufferin was telling them a story, as they walked by her side up and down the gravel path; snatches of it reached Janet now and then through the window, as they passed beneath it in their ceaseless to and fro.

John Raynor had used to tell them stories in

the old days. Janet remembered them—quaint legends he had come across in his wanderings, old tales of the ancient Britons, and their sojourn in the island, or awe-inspiring anecdotes from his own imaginative brain. Often she had listened and laughed, as he drew more and more vivid and impossible pictures of fairyland existence, till the childrens' eyes were almost starting from their heads in wonder, and the power of speech entirely left them, in the power and magnitude of the recitals.

Poor John! Tears welled up into the hazel eyes—tears whose channel seemed almost to be dried up, so often had they been shed for him whom she would never see again in this world. Janet had read of girls who had died of broken hearts, whose lovers had gone away from them to some distant land, and who had never come back, but had found a lonely grave far away under a tropical sun, or beneath the ocean waves. But *her* lover had been murdered, had died by the hand of his friend, within sight of his home, and surrounded by those who loved him. And yet *she* would have to live on, perhaps till she was an

old, grey-haired woman—always carrying with her this one sorrow of her life, till death came as a welcome release from the weary pilgrimage, and she would be free to join her lover, never to part from him again.

Mechanically she listened, as the voices reached her once more from the garden. Miss Dufferin was speaking—

“Then they came back and told the bride how her husband had slipped upon the snowy mountain side, and disappeared for ever from view; how they had searched but could discover no traces of him—he had fallen down a steep crevasse and would be frozen to death by the time they got to him, even if they *did* find him. He”—

“But, Miss Dufferin,” Binnie’s small voice interrupted, eagerly, “couldn’t they find somebody else to have gone? Were they obliged to take him right away from the wedding breakfast?”

“Yes, dear, because nobody but himself knew the path across the mountain, and he was one of the best guides in Switzerland, so when the party of gentlemen arrived at the little village they sent for Wilhelm at once, and”—

The voice died away, as the three under the window passed on. Janet was interested—she waited with almost breathless eagerness to hear more. Again came the gentle monotonous tones.

“And so she saw him again. The glacier thundering down the mountain into the valley below, bore with it the form of Wilhelm—looking just the same as he had done fifty years ago, for he was frozen, you see, and therefore remained just as he had fallen. Among the crowd who came to see the strange sight was an old woman, white-haired and feeble. In the handsome young man who lay before her, she recognized her husband, to whom she had been married so many years ago. She was seventy now, he looked like her son. She turned away and wept, for she feared he would not care for her any more when she went to meet him in the other world; but the good pastor comforted her, and told her that she too would be young and beautiful then, as she was fifty years ago, when Wilhelm chose her for his wife.”

“That’s a very pretty story, *I* think,” said Winnie.

“So do I,” echoed Binnie, decidedly.

“Miss Dufferin, the children had better go in now, it is getting damp.”

Mrs. Mervyn’s voice came from the window of the dining-room, immediately underneath Janet’s apartment.

“Are you going out, mother?” asked the children in a breath.

“Yes, into the village.”

“Can I go for you, Mrs. Mervyn?” ventured the governess, timidly.

“You can come with me, if you will; I shall be glad of help with this basket. I must take some soup and a few luxuries to old Stephen Fox.”

The sound of receding footsteps told Janet presently that her mother and Miss Dufferin had set off on their errand. She rose, and closing the window, went over to her usual seat by the bright fire.

A sigh escaped her lips, as she sank into the low, easy chair, and her thoughts returned into their old channel, intermixed somehow now with the tale Miss Dufferin had told the children. Would John ever see *her*, she wondered, when she was an old woman, feeble and tottering, with sad,

wrinkled brow, and dim, sightless eyes. If so, would he not repent him that he had ever loved her? Would he come to meet her at the golden gates, and start back appalled at the sight of her bent, trembling form? He would look so bright and bonnie, and expect her to be the same. Janet shuddered.

Then all at once her brow contracted, and a spasm of pain crossed her face. "*He*, Captain Macgregor, had done the foul deed; they said so, and it must be true. His hand, which she had clasped in gratitude for the words of reassurance he had uttered, had been steeped in the blood of him she loved better than life itself. He *could* not have entered her presence if it were so; and yet, yet"—

Janet rose from her seat, and walked restlessly to and fro, according to her usual custom in times of unwonted agitation. A knock at the door arrested her steps.

"Come in," she said, wearily.

Annette, Mrs. Mervyn's maid, entered, with a card.

"Lady Macgregor, miss, would like to see you just for a minute alone—she asks it as a favour.

I said you wouldn't see any one ; but Miss Janet" —the girl hesitated—"she seemed so sad, and begged so hard you would see her."

"Ask her up here," Miss Mervyn said, shortly.

"What can she want with me?" she thought, a frown taking the place of the sad look of resigned apathy, so familiar to it now.

In a few minutes Lady Macgregor, pale and agitated, entered the room. She came up to Janet, and, putting her hands on her shoulders, gazed fixedly at her for some minutes without speaking.

"My poor child!" she said, at last; and then she sank into a chair, and covering her face with her hands sobbed aloud.

Janet stood looking at her, her face growing paler, her white lips quivering.

"Don't," she said, gently, "don't cry—I never do. What good are tears for a sorrow like mine?"

Lady Macgregor lifted her handkerchief to her eyes, and, checking her sobs, looked sadly at the pale, sorrowful girl before her.

"Janet," she said, slowly, "you speak of *your* sorrow, do you think it can equal *mine*? My only

son accused of murder, the name which has been revered and honoured through all the centuries of its existence, branded by shame; but my boy is innocent—I know he is, and *you* must know it, too?"

She looked with eager, questioning eyes at Janet. The girl shook her head.

"I don't know what to think," she said. "He came the other day to see me, surely, *surely*," emphatically, "he would not have said what he did if he had murdered Jack; besides, he was his friend, and—Oh, Lady Macgregor! what shall we do?"

Her voice died away in a low wail of despair.

"Janet, as surely as I believe that there is a merciful and righteous God above us, so surely do I believe Bertie is innocent. What I came here to-day for, was to ask you a question, which I beg you in the name of heaven to answer me truly and honestly. Had you ever any reason to think my son cared for you?"

She put the question searchingly, her eyes fixed on the face of her companion. Janet looked surprised and perplexed.

“ Certainly not,” she replied at length, decisively.

“ Because—they—they say Bertie killed Mr. Raynor because he was jealous of him,” Lady Macgregor went on, speaking with difficulty.

“ Do they say so ? ”

Janet asked the question in a half-whisper, her face almost awe-struck in its amazement.

“ Yes, that is what they say.”

“ Then, Lady Macgregor, your son is as guiltless as you or I. John”—she hesitated, a faint colour coming into the pale cheeks—“ John loved *me*, but Captain Macgregor loved my sister Gwendoline.”

Lady Macgregor started.

“ Loved Lady Sylvestre ! ” she said, slowly.

Janet nodded.

“ Do not say I told you—but I know it was so; only she was engaged to Lord Sylvestre just after she first met Captain Macgregor, so”—Janet hesitated.

“ Janet, what can we do to prove my boy’s innocence? what can we do? ” sobbed the poor mother, her tears breaking out afresh.

“ Perhaps the murderer may be found; but I

don't seem to care—nothing will ever bring John back."

There was a depth of hopeless misery in the girl's voice. Lady Macgregor rose and kissed her.

"My poor child!" she said again. "From my heart I pity you. I felt that I must come and see that you were not cursing my poor unfortunate boy in your heart. Good-bye."

Without another word she turned and quitted the room noiselessly, as she had entered it, and took her solitary homeward way—her thoughts full of her only son.

## CHAPTER X.

### “A LADY IN THE CASE.”

ACCUSED of murder; he, the man whose whole life had been one of unblemished honour, the heir to a baronetcy, one of the oldest in the kingdom, bearing a name which had ever stood first in the annals of knighthood and chivalry, revered and esteemed by all men. Well might Bertie Macgregor hang his head with shame that such a dire disgrace should have fallen upon his noble race—well might he shrink from the sight of the members even of his own family, that family whose grief and fear for him filled his heart with bitterness and despair.

What hope had he of proving his innocence before the world? Only a miracle could do that, with all the damning evidence against him. Even his father turned away his head in stern disbelief, when he had heard his son's version of the affair, which was giving new interest to the daily papers throughout the kingdom, and forming the chief

topic of conversation among every class, high and low, rich and poor, in all the towns and villages in England.

Greater still would be the interest, when the case of "Murder by an Officer in the Isle of Wight" should be tried at length at the Winchester Assizes, and poor old Sir Randolph Macgregor bowed his grey head in shame at the thought of his sullied name, and refused to hear a word of exculpation or excuse offered him on behalf of his only, and once dearly loved son. Alas ! that son must never hope for forgiveness in this world from the father whose proud name he had dragged through the dirt and pollution of a trial for felony—the father whose son was a murderer !

And let not my readers think that the old baronet was an unusually hard or unnatural parent; he but followed the dictates of a soldierly love of rectitude and honour. "Justice," he had often been heard to say, "must know no distinction of persons—no ties of kindred or affections." Like Brutus of old, he would have sent his son to the gallows himself, had he found him guilty of crime ; and with this sense of honour and justice,

was the indomitable pride which was the curse, so to speak, of his race. His son had caused a public scandal, had made the name of Macgregor a by-word throughout the kingdom, and whether or not he were guilty of the crime imputed to him, he had let circumstances point him out as a murderer.

Thus Sir Randolph had spoken when his son besought him to believe him innocent, and all the explanations and entreaties in the world would not have altered his way of thinking.

In vain had Lady Macgregor pleaded for the "victim of a mistake," as she declared him to be; in vain had she and her daughter, with tears in their eyes, entreated him not to believe the dear boy guilty, and to be kind to him, at any rate, for *their* sakes, if not for his own.

"It is no use, Mary, I cannot speak and behave to him as I used, while this cloud is between us. I do not consider his explanation satisfactory. 'He does not remember,' he says, when I put any important question to him; and he either cannot, or will not, enlighten me upon the subject of the conversation with John Raynor, which bears so

much upon the case in point. Under these circumstances, I decline to have anything to do with him. He can go his own way; thank heaven my days upon earth will be few, I shall not much longer have to walk among my fellow men with the burden of disgrace upon my head."

And with bitter thoughts in his heart against his only son, and the weight of a great sorrow which would last him his life, the old man shut himself up in his study, and brooded over the sad fate which had humbled his pride in the dust.

Great had been the consternation in Captain Macgregor's regiment when the news of the Grayling murder got abroad. Ill-natured men were of opinion that "that conceited young ass Macgregor would fulfil their oft repeated predictions that he would come to the gallows, and serve him right, by Jove!" Others, who looked upon the handsome, easy-going captain with sentiments of reverential affection, were sincerely grieved, and utterly refused to believe him for one instant guilty. Major Ponsonby was highly indignant, vowing vengeance upon coroner and jury alike for their stupidity in condemning an

innocent man upon such mere circumstantial and contradictory evidence.

Scarcely a man in the whole regiment but was sorry when Captain Macgregor sent in his papers ; and it was announced, privately and officially, that he was selling out.

"No, Ponsonby, don't ask me," he had said when the major urged him to wait, at least, till after the trial, which might prove his innocence to the world, and clear his name. "I could not bear to think that the dear old regiment, in which my father served before me, and in which he held so high a position, should be sullied by having among its officers a man upon whom even the suspicion of murder had rested. No, my future life, if indeed I escape the fate which seems to await me, must be passed far away from those who in former days were my friends. You, old fellow, will stick by me, I know ; I could not bear to break with *you*, but you believe in my innocence, and we have never had a secret from each other. Were it not for this, I would never look upon your face again."

He turned away, overcome by some undefined

emotion; but from that day his friend never looked at him without a feeling of reverential pity for the martyr-like fate which was his.

But with all Bertie's sufferings of wounded pride and despairing bitterness, there was one thought ever in his mind more terrible to bear than any other—one which haunted him day and night with maddening persistency. What would *she*, the girl whom he had loved and lost, whose image, though she was now the bride of another, never left his tortured breast, what would she think of all this? What would be *her* feelings towards him if he should be found guilty, and die the death of a felon? Would she not think it an interposition of Providence that she had been able to escape having anything to do with so great a villain?

Poor Bertie had thought and brooded so over the horrible crime imputed to him, that sometimes he almost fancied he had really done the deed. He saw himself in imagination lift up his hand and strike his friend to the earth, saw himself hurrying with frantic haste from the spot, heard the feeble cries for help, which would reach

no other human ear, as the hues of death gathered round the stunned prostrate form. But how had he himself lived on through the days that followed? Where was the remorse and terror which should have followed the horrible deed? He could not remember. He must have been mad then—perhaps he was going mad now.

Gwendoline would pity him, perhaps, if she thought that love for her had deprived him of reason. Yes, that was it—love for her and bitter disappointment that she had remained unmoved by all his tender entreaties and persuasions, that she had preferred a countess's coronet to the love and devotion which she knew he felt towards her, and which she had seemed to return; all this had driven him mad.

He shivered and glanced almost nervously round the bare, cold-looking room—his prison. Yes, his prison; and he a prisoner, awaiting his trial for murder. He wondered half vaguely to himself how he got there. His mind had been so full, at the time of the trial, of his bitter, regretful thoughts about the girl who had wrecked his happiness, that he had taken little or no heed of the critical

position in which he was placed. Now, in the solitude of his cell, he had time to think of everything; and the thought had made itself quite clear to him that the time might come when he should suffer (the innocent for the guilty) the ignominious death of the gallows.

It seemed so long ago now since the old happy days when he had not a care in the wide world. He almost doubted if he had not changed his identity altogether. He, whose careless life of ease and pleasure had been unmarred by anything more harassing than the result of a race, or the difficulty of choosing a hunter. Caressed and flattered by women, since the time when turned-up collars and tail coats, had been a blissful dream of the future, he had yet remained unscathed and heart-whole through all his eight-and-twenty years, till the bright summer day when the first tiny seed had taken root in his heart, to spring up and overwhelm him with its gigantic growth. The first sight of Auriol Mervyn had made a new feeling of interest stir within him, which, had he not met the sister who was her counterpart, yet so far lovelier, might have ripened into love. But

Gwendoline it was, who had taken his heart by storm ; who had awakened in his being the passion which consumed him ; every glance of her blue eyes, every turn of the graceful figure, every smile upon the haughty lips, had made his love for her increase a thousandfold. And she was the bride of another. She had set at naught his tender, almost broken-hearted entreaties ; she had wedded the man who could give her a title and wealth, without one thought of *him* and his misery. He, fool that he was, had actually stood by and heard the words which made her Lord Sylvestre's wife. With a smile upon his face, and agonized regret at his heart, he had made himself an agreeable guest at her wedding ; none guessing the torture he was enduring, nor the effort it was to him to keep his hands off his fortunate rival. His former hatred towards Lord Sylvestre had, however, changed by this time into cordial liking. The earl's evident friendliness and desire to aid his less fortunate rival by every means in his power, had done much to banish the ill-feeling which Bertie had so long harboured against him.

Lord Sylvestre had come to see him too, since

his incarceration in Winchester Gaol, and had spoken such kindly words of sympathy and hope as had not a little cheered the lonely heart of the prisoner. On his departure, he had put into Macgregor's hand a note from Gwendoline.

“My wife has expressed her sympathy in writing, as she could not come,” Lord Sylvestre said. “She feels for you very much, I know, and joins with me in wishing you well out of this wretched affair.”

This letter Bertie had treasured up as his most coveted possession. He took it out now, and eagerly read over the contents, which he knew by heart.

“One line I must write to you to say how grieved I am about this dreadful mistake, for you are innocent; I know it, I feel it. Nothing on earth should alter my opinion. Through all that happens, you have the earnest sympathy and heartfelt commiseration of

“GWENDOLINE.”

No more—no proud signature of her husband's name; no hint of the different relations in

which they stood to each other—she a countess, rich beautiful, the queen of society; *he*, poor, accused of the most deadly sin, an almost convicted felon.

He laid the letter on the table, and bowing his head on his hands, sobbed loud tearless sobs of utter misery.

There came a knock at the door, and a warder entered, followed by Major Ponsonby.

"A gentleman for you, sir," the former said civilly, as the prisoner took no notice of their entrance.

A look of pity crossed the Major's face as he saw his friend's attitude; but with a "Well, Bertie, old fellow, thought I would give you a look as I was down this way," he came forward and held out his hand.

Macgregor did not move. After one glance at his visitor, he relapsed into his old, desponding attitude, merely saying—

"I thought you were at Aldershot?"

"No; I ran up to London last night, and came on here this morning, but"—coming nearer to him, and laying a kindly hand on his shoulder—

"cheer up, old fellow. I daresay it will come all right; don't desppond about it."

Then his eyes fell upon the open letter. He saw the gold monogram, the signature, "Gwendoline," written in the large, clear handwriting at the bottom of the page; and though he was too honourable even to glance at the words, which were so plainly legible, he yet altered his opinion as to the cause of the prisoner's dejected manner.

Bertie roused himself, and looked round the room.

"Sit down, won't you?" he said, wearily. "There is another chair somewhere about."

"Thanks, I can't stop a minute. I only wanted to say that if I can be of any service to you when"—he hesitated—"when the trial comes on, I shall be at your disposal. Who is your counsel?"

"Codrington," replied the other, absently.

His eyes were bent upon the floor in gloomy thought.

"Ah! clever fellow; pulled that man through who was had up last year for mur—"

Here the Major turned rather red, and pretended to cough.

"He won't get *me* off," Bertie remarked, gloomily.

"My dear fellow, you are awfully in the blues to-day. Has anything fresh happened?"

"No, nothing particular. Only I sit here and think, think, think, all day long, till I very nearly think myself into a madman!" was the vehement reply. "It is hard for a fellow to have to give up all his friends, sell out of his regiment, and become a wretched prisoner in this cursed hole, for a crime of which he is as innocent as the babe unborn."

"I think you were wrong to sell out, Bertie, I have told you so over and over again; and lots of our fellows have said the same," Major Ponsonby said, earnestly. "They would give anything to have you among them again."

"Much obliged to them, I'm sure. No thank you, Douglas. Even if I escape the gallows, I have pride enough left to prevent me from mixing with you fellows after what has happened. I shouldn't care to be pointed out as 'the fellow, don't you know, who was had up for murder; killed some friend of his, they said,' and so on.

No, I shall go abroad if I am not hung, to Australia or America, where they are not quite so particular as to the society they mix with, and any poor devil may have a chance. I shall change my name, and turn sheep farmer—a congenial employment for a man of my energetic nature and thorough knowledge of business," with a bitter laugh.

Major Ponsonby rose from his seat and stood with his back to the fire, looking down at his friend with an earnest, penetrating glance.

"Bertie, you're not the man I took you for," he said, presently. "I should have thought you would have held your head as proudly as ever during this affair. Do you suppose if *I* were accused of a crime to-morrow of which I was as innocent as *you* are"—

"How do you know I am innocent?" came the startling interruption.

The Major stared at his friend, thinking he had suddenly taken leave of his senses. Then his face grew white and stern, and he seized Macgregor's arm.

"Bertie! for heaven's sake tell me! You are not"—

He could not finish the sentence.

“Oh, I am innocent enough. I only asked you how *you* knew it. If everybody is thinking me guilty, why don’t *you* ? ”

Major Ponsonby heaved a gigantic sigh of relief.

“ By Jove, you quite startled me,” he said, then resuming his former earnest manner, “ As I was saying, if I were accused to-morrow of a crime of which I was as guiltless as you are, do you suppose I should give people a loop-hole to think what they liked of me, by showing all the symptoms of a guilty conscience ? No, I would try to be as usual; telling by my face and manner that I was as innocent of the crime imputed to me as the rest of my fellow-men, and that I defied them to prove to the contrary.”

He drew himself up, his grey eyes sparkling with conscious integrity. Macgregor shook his head sadly.

“ It’s all very well to talk, Douglas; but if your own father turned against you, it would take more than ordinary self-conceit to brave it out. Why, nobody in this world believes me innocent but my mother, and you, and”—

His eyes wandered to the open letter upon the table. Major Ponsonby's followed them.

"A lady in the case?" he said, inquiringly.

Bertie laughed nervously, the red flush which the thought of Gwendoline always called up mounting to his forehead.

"Yes, a lady friend of mine; the girl who was married to Sylvestre the other day," he replied, hurriedly.

"Oh," the Major said, shortly.

"Douglas, if I am hanged, I am going to leave you the furniture of my rooms in town, just as it stands," Bertie went on, changing the subject; the expression of his friend's face irritated him; "you have often envied me the possession of it."

"Thanks," the Major answered, absently. He was trying to solve a problem in his own mind.

"Darlon offered me five hundred once for that small sketch of 'Sunflower'; you remember her, don't you? I meant to run her at Newmarket for — But, of course, that's over now," he sighed.

"Well, I wouldn't sell the sketch then, but you can do what you like with it; and the other things will fetch something too."

“Thanks,” said the Major again.

His eyes were still fixed upon the open letter; the problem was slowly unravelling itself.

“Bertie,” he began slowly, bringing his eyes back to his friend’s face, “I want to ask you a question.

“Ask it then, by all means.”

“You won’t be offended?”

“Not in the least.”

“Then, will you tell me if it is on that lady’s account”—nodding in the direction of the letter—“that you will not tell the substance of your last conversation with John Raynor?”

Macgregor looked surprised.

“Why should you think so?” he asked, evasively.

“Because I am certain there is something behind which you will not tell; and because you are just the sort of fellow to let a chivalrous feeling of honour lead you to sacrifice yourself for a woman who will not give you another thought. And I must say”—

“Enough; we will not discuss the subject further. I have my own ideas as to honour and

chivalry, as you are pleased to term it, and I shall abide by them. I take a good deal from you, Douglas; but there must be a limit even to *your* prerogatives."

"Now, old fellow, don't fly out. You cannot, surely, mind my speaking of a married woman who, as the wife of another man, can be nothing whatever to *you*. Lady Sylvestre is a cold, proud woman; she"—

"Is not to be spoken of between us," interrupted Macgregor, hotly. "Was that all you wanted to ask?" after a short pause.

"Yes; once for all, Bertie, I tell you it is a mistake, and you will find it out for yourself some day."

"If some day ever comes for me," bitterly.

Major Ponsonby held out his hand.

"Don't look at the dark side so much, old boy. Good-bye; I shall be in town till Thursday, so I'll run down to Winchester again to-morrow or day after."

As Major Ponsonby walked along through the quaint old streets of the town, the problem resolved itself in his mind something after this fashion—

“That woman has a great deal to do with it, as I am a British officer. I always thought as much; but he shall *not* sacrifice himself for *her*, if I have to take the case in hand myself. Awfully awkward it would be, by Jove ! ”

## CHAPTER XI.

### MRS. MERVYN FEELS HER POSITION.

“ Is Miss Bottomly at home? ”

The small servant at the Elms stood with her apron up to her face, wholly aghast at the sight of the grand carriage and the tall footman, who had to repeat his question ere she could gather her senses sufficiently together to reply in the affirmative. Martha Clegg certainly thought, as she expressed it afterwards, “ That the world were comin’ to a end straight off,” when she beheld the tall footman descend the narrow garden path, open the door of the brougham, and touch his hat respectfully to the gorgeously-attired lady who alighted.

Martha had barely time to exclaim, in a hoarse whisper, to some individual behind her, “ It’s the lady from Abbotts Home, mum,” before Mrs. Mervyn had rustled up the steps and entered the house.

“ Can I see Miss Bottomly for a few minutes? ”

she said, looking severely at the small servant, who thereupon became painfully conscious of her torn apron, rough head, and smutty face.

“Yes ‘m, I dessay,” she faltered nervously. “Will you step h’in, ‘m ; and I’ll tell Miss Mary.”

She led the way to the drawing-room, Mrs. Mervyn rustling behind her, the “swish, swish,” of her silk gown sounding very awe-inspiring in the small, dimly-lighted hall. Martha’s spirits and courage had already sunk to zero.

“Say that Mrs. Mervyn would be glad to see Miss Bottomly for five minutes ; she will not detain her longer,” repeated that lady, as, after a supercilious glance round the pretentious-looking apartment, she sat down on the edge of the only serviceable chair the room contained, and beat a little impatient tattoo upon the floor with her foot.

Certainly of all things in the world most unpleasant to her, this visit was the very worst. Mrs. Mervyn felt that she could even now find it in her heart to flee from the house, and thus escape her self-imposed task. But no, she would not draw back ; so much depended upon this interview. And after putting her pride in her

pocket, as had she done, she felt it would never do to show the white feather ; besides, Mr. Ashby had told her it would be the best plan to attack Miss Bottomly in person ; and though, as a rule, Mrs. Mervyn had no opinion of the absent-minded Vicar's discriminating powers, still in this instance she had made up her mind to follow his advice. She had not settled the matter of introducing the object of her visit at all to her own satisfaction when the door opened, and Mary Bottomly entered the room.

She greeted her visitor coldly, and with none of her accustomed gushing manner. Mrs. Mervyn felt that her task would be no easy one. She was startled, moreover, at the extraordinary pallor of the girl's countenance, and the general look of gloomy sadness in her manner and expression.

“Have you been ill ?” she asked, as after a stiff greeting, Miss Bottomly sat down upon the gaudy blue damask sofa, and folding her hands in her lap, waited for Mrs. Mervyn to speak.

“No ; I am quite well, thank you.”

There was a pause. Mrs. Mervyn studied intently the pattern on her silver card-case.

"I called this afternoon, Miss Bottomly," she began at length, but without lifting her eyes, "to speak to you upon a matter of great importance."

Miss Bottomly's small, restless eyes came back from their scrutiny of her visitor's apparel to her face, and rested there, but she did not speak.

"It is a painful subject to me, and, I may say, one which requires no little courage on *my* part to broach. But for the sake of my girls"—Mary started visibly—"I feel it must be done. Miss Bottomly, when you gave evidence at the inquest upon the death of Mr Raynor, I believe you in some way hinted that the cause of the murder was jealousy—jealousy of one of my daughters." Mrs. Mervyn had lifted her eyes now, and they were full of an angry light as she fixed them full upon the girl before her. "I wish to ask you what you meant by such an insinuation?"

"I meant nothing. I merely answered the questions I was asked," was the sullen reply.

"But you could have no reason even for *supposing* that my daughters had anything to do with the quarrel, if quarrel there were, which I doubt.

Captain Macgregor and Mr. Raynor were always good friends."

Miss Bottomly tossed her head, but made no further reply. Mrs. Mervyn went on—

"I do not think it fair that my girls should be made the butt of public scandal; I consider it, in fact, the greatest impertinence upon the part of anybody to dare to mention their names in connection with this shocking affair. Why did you pitch upon *them*, pray?"

Mrs. Mervyn was getting angry now—her voice, usually so calm, had risen.

"I do not see that I am bound to answer any of your questions, Mrs. Mervyn. I know that Captain Macgregor was in love with one of your daughters, the one who was married, for I heard him at your ball asking her to give up her husband and marry him instead."

The shot was fired at random, but it went home. Mrs. Mervyn's face paled, and she let her card-case fall to the floor with a loud crash. Even as she stooped to pick it up, however, her calmness returned, and outwardly she was the same reserved, proud woman who had entered the house.

ten minutes before—for a sudden thought had darted like lightning into her mind.

“So that was why you wrote me those anonymous letters,” she said, coldly, looking keenly at Miss Bottomly, across whose face a tide of deep crimson had swept, leaving it more ghastly even than before. “Are you aware of the penalty usually inflicted upon the writers of such?”

Not a muscle of Mrs. Mervyn’s face had moved, not a sign did she show of the triumph she felt at having hit so cleverly upon the truth—for there was no mistaking the fact that the girl was startled out of herself at the suddenness and unexpectedness of the accusation.

“I—I did not”—she began, hurriedly.

“Do not waste words in useless prevarication. You wrote those letters, therefore it is not worth while to add falsehood to your other misdemeanours. It is, of course, wholly ridiculous to talk to *you* about the vulgarity of such an act—a person who would so demean herself can have little refinement about her—but it is of the consequences I must speak. When I first received one of those letters, I made up my mind to discover the writers

and punish them. My intention is not altered at the present time."

Still the same calm, cold voice, that had so much hidden determination in its icy tones. Mary Bottomly suddenly rose from her seat and burst into tears.

"It is a shame to say I wrote them! and even if I had done so, havn't your daughters been always unkind and disagreeable to me? Havn't they made me a laughing-stock to everybody by leaving the choir and Guild because *I* was there? What are *they* better than *us*, I should like to know!" vehemently.

"They would at least scorn to write a letter of the sort with which *you* have favoured me," Mrs. Mervyn replied, quietly, the contemptuous curl of her lip increasing every moment.

"Besides, you can't prove that I wrote them," went on the girl, still sobbing.

"There will be no proofs wanting, now that I have discovered the actual writer. May I ask if your mother is aware of your performances?"

Mary took her hankerchief away from her eyes and looked at her visitor in horror.

“ My mother ? Oh, Mrs. Mervyn, please don’t say anything about it to *her* ! And I didn’t write them—at least”—

“ Your mother must hear of it eventually,” said Mrs. Mervyn, coldly. “ You cannot think that having taken so little pains to spare *me*, I should go out of my way to do the same by you. I resolved to punish the writer of those letters, as I told you, and—I shall do it,” rising from her seat as she spoke.

Her words had the desired effect. Miss Bottomly came a step towards her.

“ Stay, Mrs. Mervyn, *do* stay and listen to me. I will do *anything*, apologise on my knees if you require it, but don’t tell mother ! ”

Mrs. Mervyn’s last card remained yet unplayed. She considered a moment.

“ I will consent to be silent, nay, even to overlook the affront you have offered me,” she began, slowly, as though weighing each word before she uttered it, “ but on *one* condition only.”

“ And that ? ” Mary asked, breathlessly.

“ Is that you make no mention of my daughters at the forthcoming trial,” was the stern reply.

There was silence. Mrs. Mervyn watched the pale face of the girl keenly. Now that the real object of her visit was out, she felt like a war-horse who scents battle, and—victory.

Mary Bottomly's feelings were far different, she thought of the letter which even now lay treasured up in her pocket—thought of the words, “If you want to earn my everlasting gratitude, keep to the evidence you gave at the inquest,” which had drawn from her a solemn promise of assent. Then she thought of the disgrace of a public exposure, of her mother's wrath and sorrow, of the bad opinion of the vicar, with whom she had managed so to ingratiate herself; above all, of Mr. Robertson's disgust at her unlady-like behaviour. She felt her hatred against this stern, proud woman before her deepen with every thought of her heart.

“Well?” was the cold query, as the silence became embarrassing.

“I cannot go from what I said before,” in a low tone.

“Very well. Then the consequences must, of course, rest with you. I have given you an

opportunity of making some amends for your insolent and uncalled-for behaviour, and I can do no more. You know nothing of my daughters—I do not suppose Lady Sylvestre has spoken half-a-dozen words to you in her life!"

Could Mrs. Mervyn have known it, these last words damaged her cause considerably; for at the mention of her daughter by her new title, as though far removed from ordinary mortals, Mary's heart was tenfold hardened. Better far the world scoff at her, and her mother turn against her, than this woman escape the publicity of being mixed up in a murder case.

"You can do what you like," she said, sullenly, "I mean to tell all I know, when I am asked."

Mrs. Mervyn looked at her for a minute, gathering wrath in her calm face and cold grey eyes. Then, without a word, she turned and swept from the room, her silken skirts trailing behind her—out of the door and down the garden path to her carriage, as though the world held but one person—herself.

"Home," she said, sharply, to the footman and then taking up the book with which she

always beguiled the solitude of her drives, strove to put away, till a more convenient season, the troubled thoughts which *would* intrude themselves upon her mind.

She had built too much upon earthly hopes of grandeur and position. Her eldest daughter was the wife of an earl, and when that event happened Mrs. Mervyn had thought that fortune smiled upon her, and that in the years to come, all her daughters would have gained that for which she so waited and hoped—a standing in society. And then had come the affair with John Raynor ; *that*, happily, was over now, and Janet would have got over her love-fit, and foolish sorrow for her lover's death, by the time the London season came round, with its whirl of gaiety, its handsome titled visitors, and constant round of elegant and refined society.

“But then,” Mrs. Mervyn’s brow clouded over again, as she listlessly turned the pages of her novel, her thoughts very far from the hero and heroine, whose joys and sorrows were therein-portrayed in glowing language and sentimental improbability, “there was this trial coming on—

her daughters would have their names brought publicly before the world at large as the cause of the jealousy which led to the murder. For Gwendoline it mattered little, but Janet"—Mrs. Mervyn shuddered—"it would spoil all her prospects for years to come. She would be marked out as 'the girl, you know, who was the cause of that poor young Macgregor being hanged for murder,' for people would not discriminate between them, and already it was the second Miss Mervyn who, report said, was the cause of the quarrel. Very likely she would have to go as a witness, her portrait would be in the illustrated papers along with the horrors of prisons and felons." Again Mrs. Mervyn shuddered. "She must set her brains to work again to devise some new plan of escape. Janet must be too ill to appear in court; and for the rest, perhaps time would bring a solution of the difficulty."

The carriage drew up before the door of Abbott's Home. The latter was open, and Mr. Mervyn stood upon the threshold talking to Mr. Ashby.

The Vicar came forward and raised his hat as Mrs. Mervyn alighted—

“Good afternoon, good afternoon,” he said, hurriedly. “I called to ask you if you consider old Stephen Fox a proper subject for charity; he has applied to me, at least his daughter has, and”—

“Will you come in a moment?” Mrs. Mervyn interrupted, more blandly than usual, as she led the way to the morning-room, the Vicar following, with rather a perturbed expression upon his face. “Old Stephen is a very worthy old man, indeed,” Mrs. Mervyn went on, as she drew off her gloves and stirred up the fire into a blaze, “I have been helping him ever since he was seized with paralysis, and a more deserving person I never met with. I suggested that he should apply to you for relief from the sick and poor fund, as I felt sure he needed it.”

“Ah, yes.” Mr. Ashby looked vexed. “As a rule, I don’t go beyond the immediate vicinity of the church,” he began. “You see, people are so ungrateful, and it is waste of time and money to help them.”

"Yet they *have* to be helped all the same," Mrs. Mervyn said, quietly. "Moreover, Mr. Ashby, of course, if you don't care to help old Stephen, I shall go on giving him what I am doing now; only, really, with so many poor people around me, I feel"—

"Not another word, Mrs. Mervyn, not another word, he shall have help, of course. I only like to know from good authority whether the cases are deserving. Miss Bottomly helps me a great deal in that way, she is so good to"—

"I think, Mr. Ashby, that the trust you place in Miss Bottomly is undeserved. I have been there to-day, as you advised, and have discovered in her the writer of the anonymous letters of which I spoke to you some time ago."

"Did she write them?" he asked, quickly.

"Yes. I am resolved to punish her, and thus make an example to others."

"I think you must be mistaken, Mrs. Mervyn," the Vicar said, pushing up his spectacles irritably.

"I am seldom mistaken, Mr. Ashby. In this case I have heard the fact acknowledged by the girl herself."

“Humph ! ” Mr. Ashby passed his hand across his mouth, looked at his nails, and pondered. “What do you propose doing ? ” he said, at length.

“I do not think of deciding till I have spoken to my husband,” was the calm reply.

“She is to be a witness at the trial, I suppose ? ” Mr. Ashby said, apropos of nothing.

“Yes ; and she will then find means of grossly maligning my daughters, and making the whole village a byeword,” vehemently. “You really are mistaken in her, Mr. Ashby.”

“She always seemed to me a very good, kind-hearted girl,” said the Vicar, thoughtfully.

“Yes, I know you think so. No doubt to *you* she is meekness itself ; and that is the reason why, in replying to my letter, you told me that you hoped I had seen the impropriety of my interposition. I certainly had done no such thing.”

“But, Mrs. Mervyn, as a clergyman, as a minister of the Gospel, I must use charity towards all men. I could not condemn Miss Bottomly upon mere hearsay.”

“It would have been quite enough if you had

used your priestly prerogative and given her a good talking too, without being uncharitable," Mrs. Mervyn said, curtly. "A minister, in *my* humble opinion, should look after the morals of his parish, and check the undue remarks upon individuals, by seeing that those individuals do nothing to call them forth. Forgive me that I speak so plainly, but I cannot think that a girl should be allowed to behave as Miss Bottomly has done, and even be encouraged to remain in the choir when her conduct has caused the withdrawal of every respectable person."

"If I turn her out of the choir and Guild, I may as well tell her to leave the village altogether; it comes to the same thing," Mr. Ashby said, crossly, pushing up the refractory spectacles.

Mrs. Mervyn's face took a look of relief.

"It would be the best thing that could possibly happen," she said, quickly. "Pray take my advice, Mr. Ashby, and get her away. The whole parish would thank you; and even Mr. Robertson will"—

"Mr. Robertson is married already; so you need

not trouble your head about *him*," the Vicar said, almost rudely.

"Married ? And to whom ?" Mrs. Mervyn almost gasped, in her amazement at the news.

"That I don't know. And he is going away ; so there will be no more scandal of that sort."

Mrs. Mervyn felt her hopes of getting rid of Mary Bottomly gradually rising. If she did not know of the schoolmaster's wife, might she not be induced to go too when he left the village ?

"Does Miss Bottomly know of this ?" she asked.

"I told Robertson he had better tell her, but of course he won't."

Mrs. Mervyn wondered, as she watched the Vicar walk away, what the world was coming to.

## CHAPTER XII.

“TWO IS COMPANY.”

OUTSIDE the Grayling Post Office stood two figures, Mrs. Pipkin watching them from her place of observation behind the little counter smiled, yes, actually *smiled* grimly to herself ; and be it said in passing that the worthy post-mistress saw not a few love passages and secret meetings from behind the dingy window panes, and could have delighted many a scandal-loving ear had she chosen ; but she was taciturn and reserved to a fault, and made no friends among her neighbours—much to their chagrin.

But in spite of her contempt for the young folks whose stolen interviews in so public a place would have caused no end of amusement to a less surly and prejudiced mind, Mrs. Pipkin decidedly favoured the two who were now talking so earnestly under her very nose. She liked (as much as it was in her nature to like anybody) the bright, gentle governess at Abbott’s Home. Miss Dufferin

was about the only person in Grayling who could extract a pleasant word from the grim post-mistress, and to *her* Mrs. Pipkin was ever ready and obliging. Mr. Cunmore, too, she favoured, because he had once taken her little grandson's part in a disturbance at the village school; and whereas the schoolmaster was henceforth in her black books, the Curate became a hero of the greatest celebrity in the annals of fame.

"A winsome cupple they'd make for sartin," she muttered; "out-an'-outers, both on 'em."

And the grim smile was still upon her lips as she turned to give a small child a penny stamp, making him open wide wondering eyes at the sight.

"I would have given everything I possessed for the poor old fellow to have lived another five minutes," Mr. Cunmore was saying.

But it was not the thought of his dead parishioner which brought the tender gleam into his eyes as he looked at his companion. Very seldom was it that he met her out alone; he could have fallen on his knees in rapturous thanksgiving for the fortune which had favoured him. And she looked so bright and pretty too this morning, in

her long sealskin jacket (a present from a rich relation, and designated by Mrs. Mervyn as “a most unsuitable garment for a person who had to earn her daily bread”), and the pretty beaver hat. Her cheeks were flushed with her walk; the dark, soft eyes were softer and darker than ever. Basil Cunmore felt all the love in his heart leap up into new life as he looked at her. And she? Her very humility made her unconscious of that which his eyes could have told her, even though her lips were silent; and if she did feel a happiness in his presence which no other person had power to call there, she disguised the fact even from herself, and strove to think that it was only because he was so kind to her, and had such a gentle way of speaking that she liked him so much.

“Yes, it was a pity he died just then,” she replied, in answer to his remark. “It would have made such a difference if we could only have got the smallest clue to the murderer.”

“He said distinctly that it was not Captain Macgregor,” Mr. Cunmore said.

“I know it was not! He no more did it than *I* did!” Miss Dufferin said, vehemently.

was now the only person in Grayling who could extract a pleasant word from the grim postmistress, and to her Mrs. Pipkin was ever ready to listen. Mr. Summore, too, she favoured, because it had once taken her little grandson's part in a disturbance at the village school; and whereas the schoolmaster was henceforth in her black books the Summore became a hero of the greatest account in the annals of fame.

"A wonderful couple they'd make for sartins," said Mrs. Pipkin, "our-air-turers, both on 'em."

And the girl's smile was still upon her lips as she handed to the small child a penny stamp, making no disguised her eyes with wondering eyes at the sight.

"I would have given everything I possessed to have lived another six months," Mr. Summore was saying.

But it was not the thought of his penitence which brought the tender gleam into his eyes as he looked at his companion. Seldom was it that he met her out alone; he had fallen on his knees in rapture for the fortune which had for so long a time

her long sealskin jacket (a present from a rich relation, and designated by Mrs. Mervyn as "a most unsuitable garment for a person who had to earn her daily bread"), and the pretty beaver hat. Her cheeks were flushed with her walk; the dark, soft eyes were softer and darker than ever. Basil Gunnmore felt all the love in his heart leap up into new life as he looked at her. And she? Her very humility made her unconscious of that which her eyes could have told her, even though her lips were silent; and if she did feel a happiness in his presence which no other person had power to call up, she disguised the fact even from herself, and was too to think that it was only because he was so kind to her, and had such a gentle way of speaking that she liked him so much.

"It was a pity he died just then," she replied, in answer to his remark. "It would have been a difference if we could only have got him elsewhere."

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Her companion bit his lip.

“ You are a staunch ally,” he said, rather coldly.

“ Am I? I like Captain Maegregor.”

“ Yes, he is a nice fellow,” curtly.

“ You say that as if you did not think so,” she exclaimed, looking at him wonderingly.

“ But I do think so, Miss Dufferin,” then as she held out her hand. “ I will go with you as far as old Stephen Fox’s, if I may; I have an errand there this morning. I want to tell you about this affair of Mike Dillon’s.”

Together they passed down the village street, and made their way towards the woods. No fear of Mrs. Mervyn encountering them, and lecturing on the impropriety of her governess being seen walking alone with the clergyman in the very heart of the village, for that lady had betaken herself to London to stay a couple of days with her sister, in order to talk over her woes and get some of Lady Denison’s worldly advice, also to take poor Hinnie and Binnie to the dentist’s—a performance which was ever associated in their minds with visions of Madame Tussaud’s and the German

Fair. Mrs. Mervyn never took her governess on these occasions; and that lady was, therefore, free to take a holiday, sweetened as it was by the absence of the stern, cold mistress of the house.

Agnes Dufferin felt her heart light as air this morning. The fresh keen breeze fanned her cheek and blew stray locks of dark silky hair across her forehead. She felt gay and happy as an imprisoned bird which escapes from its cage into liberty and sunshine.

Autumn was waning. Already the ground was strewed with the dying leaves, and the branches of the trees swayed bare and dark with every breath of wind. Fields, which a while ago had been yellow with the waving corn, now presented nothing but bleak and barren wastes; and the green slopes, where the feathery bracken had waved their proud heads beneath the summer sky, were one mass of withered yellow fronds, looking seared and decayed—the ghostly shadow of departed beauty.

Only the sea, the bright, blue, sparkling sea, was unchanged, save that upon its surface no white winged yachts skimmed gaily by; no pleasure boats danced upon its waves. Far off along the

distant horizon sailed, like phantom forms, the great men-of-war and merchant vessels, bound for some distant port; and farther still, a long line of white smoke marked the path of some outward bound steamship, on her way to the sunny lands of the far West.

“As I was saying,” Mr. Cunmore went on, after a pause, in which his eyes had been roving over the distant landscape, “Mike Dillon sent for me this morning. He had had a stroke, his wife said, and was very bad. Of course, I went at once, and—is not that Miss Leslie?” he broke off abruptly, as the figure of a lady emerged from the wood, and came quickly along the field towards them.

“I do not know; I fancy so,” replied Miss Duf-ferin, the colour suddenly deepening in her cheeks. *Why* she could not tell, except that somehow she would rather not have been walking by the side of the Curate just at this present moment.

Olive, for it was she, greeted them with a bright smile of welcome.

“I am going to meet my sisters,” she said “You have not seen them on your way, I suppose?”

“No, we have come from the village only now. I am on my way to the Willow side cottages, and intended to call in upon you on my way back, to ask for your charity in another case of distress,” Mr. Cunmore said, laughing a little.

“Then will you come in to lunch? I shall be back by then, and we can talk it over. How is Janet?” turning to Miss Dufferin.

“Not very well to-day, Miss Leslie; she seems so low-spirited and nervous. We are alone now, for Mrs. Mervyn has gone to London till to-morrow. I think it was a pity Janet did not go too, as her mother wished; it would have done her good,” thoughtfully.

“I should not think change would be very beneficial in *her* case just at present, it would only weary her. What is the bell tolling for, Mr. Cunmore; I heard it as I came through the wood. Old Fox is not dead I hope?”

“No; Mark Dillon, an old man who used to work at the Folly. He died of paralysis. By the way, Miss Leslie, he worked for *you*, did he not?”

“Yes, for about three weeks. But he was not strong enough, and too old for work.”

“He sent for me this morning, and began to make a most extraordinary confession. He said he knew who murdered poor John Raynor, that it was not Captain Macgregor; but he declared he dare not tell, for the life of him, before. He only meant to do so now because he was dying, and it would make no difference. He mandered on a long time, I of course, trying to get him to come to the point of his story, and his wife urging him not to tell; till at last, just as I thought I should be able to clear the innocent and point out the guilty, poor Dillon had another seizure, and never spoke again. He made gestures of assent as I read the prayers for the sick and dying, but to all my other questions he turned a deaf ear. I don’t know what to do about it at all. I can tell my story of course, but have no proofs; and his wife says it was all ‘daftness’ (as she called it), and that her husband knew no more who murdered the Squire than *she* did.”

“Very strange.”

Miss Leslie had listened intently to the Curate’s narrative, a look of disappointment crossing her features at its close.

“Yes, he is dead now, poor old fellow; so it is no use thinking of any further intelligence, and his wife swears she knows nothing whatever of the matter,” Mr. Cunmore said, thoughtfully.

“I am so sorry; I am sure Captain Macgregor is innocent. If we could *only* find out who did it!”

Miss Leslie said farewell, and went on her way, her mind full of this new idea. How they seemed to be baffled at every turn and corner.

“I will go and see Janet,” she thought to herself. “Mrs. Mervyn is away, so I can venture unmolested. I suppose the question between those two will be settled ere long. Miss Dufferin looked quite pretty this morning. They will be a well-assorted couple.”

The “well-assorted couple,” meanwhile, took their way across the fields and into the silent wood. We will not follow them, for the old adage still holds good; and we can picture them to ourselves, as we recall the days long ago when we too walked beneath the overshadowing trees, listening to the old, old story

Happily, happily wandered they on,  
Two is company, three is none.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Could we manage to get to Sandown this afternoon, do you think?”

Luncheon was over at the Abbey, and Mr. Cummore had taken his departure. Olive put the question with a doubtful look at the gathering sky overhead, as she stood in the old doorway watching the tall figure disappearing, with rapid strides, down the winding avenue of chestnuts.

“I want heaps of things, and Hall brought me a long list this morning with the air of a martyr. She thinks we are living quite in the back woods, I know; for she made the remark that ‘She had only put down the things that were really wanted, but she didn’t suppose we should get even *them* hereabouts.’”

“We can’t go more than two in the pony carriage all that way,” Phyllis replied musingly; “and the children will, of course, want to go, poor little dears,” looking teasingly over her shoulder at Constance and Mabel, who were performing an impromptu waltz in the hall. “They get so little pleasure.”

“What is that about pleasure?”

Constance desisted from the languid air of

affected young ladyism which she had been assuming in her dance, and flew towards her sisters, whirling Phyllis round and round in a wild and exhausting gallop.

"I am going to Sandown, but"—trying to look severe, as with a final whirl Connie deposited her sister breathless upon a neighbouring settee—"I don't think I can take any one so hoydenish as *you*, Con. You really are forgetting all refinement."

Constance sighed heavily.

"I suppose it is because I don't go enough into society," she said, meekly. "I am certain a peep at the Sandown young ladies would do me all the good in the world; give me an idea how to behave, and make me see how painful to my family must be my many shortcomings."

"You ought not to have to go as far as Sandown to discover that," said Phyllis, who had not yet recovered from her recent girations.

"We can have the big carriage and go in state, like the Mervyns," put in Mabel. "I am sure Grinsted has forgotten how to drive. We have never been out, except in the pony carriage, for

weeks ; and he told me the other day that the horses were eating their heads off ! ”

“ You had better take to riding again then,” Olive said, laughing ; “ for I cannot go for drives every day in that lumbering vehicle just for the sake of the horses. They were always meant for riding too ; we only used them for the carriage quite lately.”

“ Pray don’t call our nice landau a ‘ lumbering vehicle,’ Olive. It beats the Mervyns to fits,” Constance said, vehemently.

“ Connie always resorts to slang when she is particularly excited, if you notice. That is why I shouldn’t care to take her into society ; it would come out so strongly under the influence of supreme satisfaction at any attentions from the opposite sex,” remarked Phyllis.

“ I wonder who is being vulgar now,” Constance retorted, witheringly.

“ Don’t quarrel girls. Go and get ready ; we shall lose the best of the afternoon if we don’t set off at once. Order the carriage, Phyllis, will you ? ”

Miss Leslie moved away from the door as she

spoke and up the broad staircase, singing as she went the song which had been running in her head all day—

Happily, happily wandered they on,  
Two is company, three is none.

Sandown presented a gay scene when the Leslie's carriage dashed into the town at full speed, for the greys, released from their long rest in the stable, had almost withstood all the efforts of Grinsted to keep them within bounds; and even the five miles they had already come, seemed to have had little or no effect upon their spirits.

Generally at the approach of cold, dreary winter, a seaside town presents anything but a pleasing aspect. The shopkeepers, released from their arduous duties of the summer months, take little pride in the setting out of their windows, or the selection of their wares. Anything does for the residents they think; it is only those who come fresh from the great city of London, or our no less enterprising manufacturing towns, who need to be tempted with the *very* latest fashion in dress, jewelry, furniture or art. So the old things of last winter are unearthed from their dingy

hiding places ; everything pretty or tasteful is carefully stowed away, till the season shall return again. The shopkeepers leave their wares to the superintendence of the one "young person" (who now does quite well in place of the bevy of fair maids and obsequious shopmen who are engaged for the summer season), while they sit in their back parlours and gloat over the profits of the last three months, with their wives and families.

To-day, however, Sandown was certainly an exception to the rule. Everybody seemed to be trying to make the most of the last autumn days of sunshine, and the streets were full of gaily-dressed people, while the shops displayed their enticing wares for the last time in speculative profusion. Constance certainly had plenty of opportunity for observing the manners and deportment of the young lady part of the population, for girls were there in abundance—girls with sailor dresses and hats to match, the relics of recent conquests ; girls in velvet and plush, who tried to look fashionable, and somehow only managed to look peculiar ; girls of æsthetic tendencies in outlandish colours, and still more outlandish head-gear ; girls

of all ages, complexions and style. Passèè beauties of forty, whose gauze veils hid the wrinkles from the too observant public, and whose false curls fluttered coquettishly in the keen, fresh breezes ; pretty maidens with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks, whose gay laughter came fresh and clear as they answered the no doubt exceedingly witty sallies of their attendant cavaliers ; and groups of acknowledged “belles,” whose calm air of superiority over their less favoured sisters, was visible in their very walk and carriage.

From shop to shop went the Leslie girls, busy and delighted ; for there is certainly more pleasure to be derived from one day’s shopping in a town, when one lives in the country, than an every day’s perambulation among the tempting wares, so cunningly displayed to tempt the unwary and fastidious seekers after something new, which they did not see yesterday.

“I am tired now ; you can go into the linen-draper’s without me, and I will sit in the carriage and amuse myself by watching the people. I know you will be ages choosing your stuffs and laces, and really I could not sit it out,” Olive said

at last, when they had made a raid into almost every shop in the town ; and in spite of her sisters' eager protestations that they could not get on without her taste and judgment, she entered the carriage with a sigh of relief. " You can have the things brought out to me if you cannot decide, but go into another shop I will *not!* " decidedly.

So at last they left her, and she sat back among the cushions and watched the surging stream of passers-by, every now and then being driven off slowly up and down the street to satisfy the restless steeds.

" Miss Leslie ! This is indeed a pleasure ! "

Olive turned quickly. The carriage had just drawn up once more in front of the linendraper's, and beside it stood a tall form, clad in a thick brown ulster.

" Mr. Goldie ! " she said wonderingly, scarcely recognizing at first her guest of two months ago.

He raised his hat, and held out his hand.

" I knew you at once, even before you came up, " he exclaimed, triumphantly. " You see what a good memory I have. "

"And I did not know *you* just at first," she replied, half apologetically. "But then I am *not* very good at remembering faces; and I only saw you for such a short time."

"Yes, I owe you no end of apologies for my most unceremonious exit that morning; but my reasons were so urgent, and I felt that you would understand and forgive."

His eyes were fixed admiringly upon the pretty face and slight graceful figure, clad in the rich black satin, fur-trimmed coat, a large quaint-looking bonnet of the same crowning the soft brown hair, which the wind had blown in little wavy curls over her forehead. Truly he thought that the sweet memory he had carried in his heart since first he saw her, had come far short, even in its sweetness, of the reality.

Something of what was in his mind must have found its way to his face, for Miss Leslie coloured slightly as she answered—

"We were sorry not to see you again; it was so unfortunate we were obliged to go out that night. But you see"—smiling a little—"we did not know you were coming."

“Would you have stayed at home if you had?” he asked, smiling too. “I think not.”

“We have had a most distressing occurrence at Grayling since you were there. Of course you have seen about it in the papers—the murder of poor Mr. Raynor,” Olive said, changing the subject.

“Yes, indeed. I—I was much distressed on Macgregor’s account. He is a nice fellow, and the last person in the world to be suspected of such a crime. I saw him too about a week before it was found out. I met him in those very woods where the body was found.”

“Have you been in Grayling then since we saw you?” Olive asked suddenly, her surprise making her curious.

“Yes; but only for a few hours when I was here last. I came to see Macgregor upon business of a secret and important nature—the same business which calls me here at the present time.”

Olive looked at him in a wondering sort of way. He went on—

“I never venture out of Sandown, however, in the daytime, for fear of suspicion. But now my

fruitless search”—he checked himself—“ I mean my secret mission, will be at an end, for I can gain no clue to aid me. The murder of Mr. Raynor raised new hopes of— But what am I saying ? ” breaking off and changing colour ; “ I forgot to whom I was speaking. Are you alone ? ” in a louder tone.

“ No, my sisters are all with me. They are at present engaged in the mysteries of shopping. I had had enough of it, so preferred to wait out here till they were ready,” Olive replied, still wondering.

“ May I come and pay a farewell call before I leave England again ? ” Mr. Goldie said, leaning both arms upon the door of the carriage and looking at her fixedly.

“ Certainly ; we shall be delighted. Geoffrey is coming down on Saturday. Will you not come to dinner that evening ? ”

“ Thanks, with pleasure. And I may come incognito as I did before ? ” anxiously.

“ If you wish it,” rather coldly.

“ I should like to have your brother’s opinion upon the case I am now undertaking ; it is a

difficult and dangerous one. Killing a man would"—

He did not finish the sentence, for at this moment the shopping expedition emerged from the linendraper's, followed by an obsequious shopman laden with parcels, and Ralph Goldie turned to greet Phyllis, and be introduced to Constance and Mabel. The look of horror which had crept into Olive's eyes at his last words, still lingered there, even when she joined in the laughing conversation which ensued.

"Then we may expect you on Saturday?" she said, as, after a great deal of manœuvring, the parcels were safely stowed away, and the girls settled in the carriage.

"Yes, thanks," he replied, raising his hat.

And then Grinsted whipped up the impatient greys, and they rattled away down the street.

"How queer meeting him like that!" exclaimed Phyllis. "Have you been talking long?" turning to her sister.

Olive's eyes came back from their intent contemplation of the shops which they were whirling past.

“Some little time, yes.”

“What did you talk about?” asked Constance, eagerly.

“Oh, about the murder and his coming to see us,” returned Miss Leslie, absently.

“Why, Olive, you speak as if the murder and his coming to see us were one and the same thing!” exclaimed Mabel, in a horrified tone.

Olive started, and flushed crimson.

“What nonsense you talk, Mabel! As if they had anything to do with each other!” she said angrily. “You asked me, or Connie did, what we were talking about, and I answered to the best of my recollection. If I am always to pick and choose my words, I had better not speak.”

Mabel looked first astonished, then vexed; while Connie murmured—

“No offence, Olive dear.”

“Waiting in the cold has made your sister cross, children. She always did object to wintry winds and an open carriage,” said Phyllis, mischievously.

The angry look left Miss Leslie's face. She laughed.

"Never mind, Mab, there are some goodies in that box; you shall have them as a peace-offering from your cross elder sister," she said.

But Mabel could not understand it, all the same.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE VERDICT.

OCTOBER and November have passed away—the latter with its chill, damp winds, and thick sea-fogs—and now December is ushered in by bright frosty days, which seem as if by magic to dispel the gloom of the past month. The “Great Grayling murder case” is to be tried at the Winchester Assizes, to be held the first week in December, and many hearts are beating anxiously with fear and dread as to the results of the trial as the days go by, and the time draws near which shall decide the fate of a human being.

Mrs. Mervyn’s resolve that Janet should not be able to appear as a witness, was only too painfully verified. An entreating letter which had been received from Lady Sylvestre, begging that her sister should go and stay with her before they left Borehampton Castle for the Continent, had almost shaken Janet’s resolve not to leave Abbott’s Home. But when, a few days

later, the letter was followed by Lord Sylvestre himself, with strict injunctions from his wife not to go back without his sister-in-law, the latter event carried the day, and Janet allowed herself to be persuaded to take the opportunity of change of scene and surroundings which was offered her, and set off to all appearance willingly enough with her august escort.

A sigh of genuine relief escaped Mrs. Mervyn's lips as she watched them depart. Surely, in her new place of abode, among an entirely fresh set of people, and in a different atmosphere, the girl would forget her troubles, and the memory of John Raynor be banished from her mind. But the mother's judgment for once was at fault, and her lately recovered equanimity received a severe shock when, about a week after Janet's arrival at the castle, Lady Sylvestre wrote to say that she was so ill they had called in their medical man, whose opinion of Miss Mervyn's condition was anything but satisfactory. The severe shock to her system which the late sad occurrence had caused, made it most necessary that she should have extreme quiet of mind and body, "and,"

·Gwendoline added, “ he seems to fear an attack of brain fever.”

His prognostications proved correct, and whilst Bertie Macgregor stood before his judges to answer for the murder of his intimate friend, Janet Mervyn lay between life and death, each hour as it came seeming to hurry her with reckless, relentless speed, to that bourne from which there is no returning.

As her mother watched by her bedside, and heard the agonized calls upon her dead lover, which seemed so piteous to the anxious watchers, did no pangs of remorse stir her heart, that she had not been more lenient to him, more sympathetic to the daughter whom death was striving with might and main to snatch from her ? If she did, she gave no sign ; and Gwendoline, who had been kept in ignorance of the facts of the case with regard to John Raynor, wondered more and more as the unconscious sufferer rambled on of her parents’ unkindness, of their refusal to let her see John, and keeping him from her, of his having killed himself because he thought her false, and all the other wild delusions of her tortured brain.

The constant attendance upon her sister, and her anxiety on her account, kept Lady Sylvestre from dwelling upon the trial and its consequences. Each day as she ran her eye down the pages of the newspapers, and saw with untold misery and despair how everything seemed to be going against the unfortunate young man who stood accused of this blackest of all crimes, she felt almost as if she must have gone mad without the all-absorbing occupation in the sick-room.

Portraits of the prisoner adorned the pages of the illustrated papers, and the sight of the reproachful-looking expression upon the handsome aristocratic face seemed to pierce her to the heart. Her own face became more cold, more hard and stern, her manners more haughty and repellent, but her husband, who only saw in her demeanour the result of anxiety and weary watching, made no comment, only strove by tender solicitude and silent love to break down the barrier of reserve between them. Gwendoline felt she almost hated him because he gave her so much, and she felt she could give him nothing in return, for—

Woman's at best a contradiction still.

And perhaps had Lord Sylvestre but tried the effect of coldness and apathy towards his wife, she might in time have yearned for the love, which she now scorned.

Her mother saw the coldness and indifference with which Gwendoline treated her husband, and had on one occasion thought fit to remonstrate with her on the subject. Lady Sylvestre interrupted her in the very middle of the carefully worded sentence ; and there was a look upon her face which warned Mrs. Mervyn that her daughter had passed for ever from her control, and meant to go her own way entirely in the future.

“ Mamma, when I married Lord Sylvestre I gave it out plainly that I did so for rank and fortune,” she said, coldly, “ nothing more. *You*, of all people, should understand that ; and if my conduct towards my husband is not pleasing to him, he is the proper person to tell me of it.”

Raising her head proudly, she turned away, and for once in her life Mrs. Mervyn was forced to acknowledge herself thoroughly nonplussed.

“ Robert,” Lady Sylvestre said, some two hours later, when for a brief interval she found herself

alone with him in the library, " mamma has been lecturing me on my behaviour to you. She says you must be disgusted with me. If you are"—

Lord Sylvestre interrupted her, hastily—

" My darling, do not speak in that way. Your mother must be mad to think of such a thing! Could a man be disgusted with that which he prizes more than anything else in the world?"

Lady Sylvestre moved a step towards him, as he stood on the rug before the fire.

" Robert, when I married you I told you I would try and be a good wife to you, and you said you were content with that."

Her husband came hastily towards her, and took her in his arms.

" My own sweet love! no wife could be more to her husband than you are to me. You are worried and anxious, dearest, I know it; and that is the reason you cannot be as cheerful and happy as I should like to see you. When your sister gets better, and I can take you away to the beautiful places I long to have you see for the first time with me, you will be happy again—will you not?"

With his arms around her, his lips on hers,

he felt the happiest of created beings ; and she, though she suffered his caresses unrebuked, and even answered a gentle “ Yes ” to his loving question, felt a pang of unutterable sorrow shoot through her heart, and knew that whilst that heart remained unchanged, there could be no happiness for her in this world.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was the last day of the trial. In a few hours Herbert Macgregor would step out into the sunshine a free man, or be led away to the condemned cell, there to await death on the gallows.

Within the crowded court, so crowded that even on this cold December day, the heat became too great to be borne, where dense masses of people were packed closely together, and every available space was occupied, the struggling sunbeams played upon the earnest, anxious countenances of the jury, upon the stern face of the judge, in his fur-trimmed robes and awe-inspiring wig; upon the fussy-looking counsel, who were holding a whispered conversation, evidently of a belligerent nature, with the clerk of the court; upon the sea

of upturned faces in the body of the large hall ; upon the gay bonnets of the ladies in the gallery and the scared countenances of the witnesses ; and, lastly, lingered pityingly and lovingly upon the pale, care-worn face of the prisoner.

Outside, the busy world kept up its whirl of business and pleasure. Crowds of vehicles and foot-passengers thronged the streets, each intent on the day's round of work, or idle amusement ; only within the Cathedral Close was silence, and as the sun gleamed upon the sacred edifice, the bells rang out the usual summons to morning prayer, while within its walls a few stray worshippers were assembling in answer to the solemn call. Not a few, perhaps, mingled with their prayers an earnest entreaty for mercy upon him, whose probable fate was causing universal conjecture and anxiety—him whose fate hung in the balance, and whose days on earth seemed to be numbered.

Summoned from her daughter's bedside to give her evidence, forced to leave her child before even she had been pronounced out of danger, **Mrs. Mervyn** came to the conclusion that her

life altogether just now was a mistake. Her calm, proud face was white and haggard from sleepless nights and anxious watching, and her usually haughty demeanour had given place to nervousness and evident distress.

I will not weary my readers with a repetition of the witness's evidence. Throughout the three days of the trial, little more had been gleaned than what had transpired at the inquest; the only circumstance of note being the evidence of Mr. Cunmore, with regard to the dying words of Mike Dillon; but there the matter, as far as *he* was concerned, ended. The man had died without any explanation of his strange statement, and his secret, if it really had been anything but a delusion, had been buried with him. Notwithstanding, it seemed to cause some excitement in court, and the counsel for the prisoner felt his hopes rise in proportion.

Mary Bottomly had somewhat astonished those who heard her cross-examination, in the persistent declarations which she made, that she did not know anything of the jealousy supposed to have existed between the deceased and Macgregor. When

questioned as to whether she had ever heard rumours of the kind, she replied in the negative; nor would any amount of badgering by the counsel elicit an admission of the fact from her. Cross-examined as to whether when she met the prisoner in the wood, she had noticed if he carried the walking-stick produced in court, and acknowledged by him to be his property, she appeared, for the first time, to hesitate in her reply.

She glanced towards the prisoner, who suddenly lifted his head in eager expectation; then her gaze wandered to another face, dark and Spanish-looking, wearing almost the same earnest, expectant expression, whose eyes were fixed upon her in stern reproach. Then she raised her head, and answered boldly—

“The prisoner had, as far as I can remember, a walking-stick in his hand—whether the one produced or not, I do not know.”

Macgregor’s head sank once more upon his breast, the look of excitement died out of his face, and he was once more, to all appearance, indifferent to what was passing around him.

At length the tedious examination of the

various witnesses came to an end, and the counsel for the prisoner had addressed the court on his behalf, in a thrilling speech—wherein he set forth in glowing language, the prisoner's high position in society, his well-known reputation for honour and rectitude, his kindly nature, and the many noble qualities which were testified to by his brother officers, and those of the witnesses who were personally acquainted with him. Mr. Codrington spoke of the unlikelihood of the prisoner having, in cold blood, murdered a man with whom he appeared, according to the testimony of all the witnesses, to have been on such friendly and intimate terms.

The evidence of several persons, that of Major Ponsonby in particular, had gone far to disprove the fact that jealousy had been the cause of the murder—and to what motives, then, could it be attributed? The small fragment of conversation which had been overheard, and which in the very telling might have been exaggerated, afforded in his (the learned counsel's) opinion, no proof that angry feeling between the friends had risen to such an extent, as to cause them to come to blows.

The learned counsel closed his somewhat lengthy harangue by detailing the various discrepancies and contradictions in the evidence, drawing therefrom conclusions decidedly to the advantage of the prisoner, and showing that he was himself possessed not only of a wonderful power of rhetoric, but also of a vivid and far-seeing imagination.

Then came the summing up. There was not a sound in the crowded court, each one of the dense throng there assembled seemed afraid to lose a single word which escaped the judge's lips.

His lordship said he would state the case as briefly as possible. They had all heard the opinion of the counsel, for and against the prisoner, conveyed in the exceedingly able and eloquent speeches of those learned gentlemen. Dwelling slightly on the birth and position of the prisoner, his standing in the army, and the prospects which awaited him in the future, the judge went on to detail at greater length the main circumstances of the case.

The prisoner had, it appeared, been an intimate friend of the deceased. Upon the last occasion on which the latter was seen alive, they had been together. High words were overheard passing

between them—words of anger and recrimination. Of the real substance of the conversation they were left in doubt, the prisoner steadily refusing to detail any of the facts—this, of course, was much against him. On the same evening on which the prisoner and his friend were last seen together the former went to London by the night train, *en route* for Aldershot. His manner, which for days past had been gloomy and distressed, being more than usually depressed on this occasion. A week afterwards the dead body of a man was discovered in the Wildash woods, near the spot where the two friends had been last seen. It was identified as that of Mr. Raynor, who had mysteriously disappeared since that fatal day. From the testimony of the doctor who had examined the body, death had been caused by a blow or blows of a cudgel, or stick, evidently aimed from behind.

The finding of the walking-stick by the woman, close by the place where the murder was committed, and identified by the prisoner himself as his own property, was another prejudicial circumstance against him—as, from the evidence of the surgeon who examined the wounds on the head of

the deceased, the blows might easily have been inflicted by such a weapon.

On the other hand, no cause for the supposed quarrel could be discovered. The deceased gentleman appeared to have been on the most friendly and intimate terms with the prisoner, nor did they seem (with the exception of the case in point) even to have differed upon any subject. The case was a most difficult and complicated one—almost the most difficult and complicated which had ever come under his jurisdiction—the evidence of the several witnesses being so exceedingly contradictory and perplexing. The idea conveyed by the testimony of the members of deceased's household, as to the disturbed state of his mind upon the day when he was last seen by them alive, and Mr. Mervyn's account of the interview between himself and the young man, in which he shattered the latter's future hopes, led to the suspicion of suicide, under the influence of severe mental disquietude; but the appearance of the body when found, and the nature of the wounds upon his head and face, precluded any possibility of such having been the case.

All that the jury had now to go upon was the testimony of Miss Bottomly as to the quarrel; that of the woman who found the stick; and the testimony of the butler at Grayling Hall, as to the disturbed state of his young master's mind, both before and after the shocking tragedy.

The judge paused. A loud cry had resounded through the court, a cry of mental distress, and old Donald was carried out, in a kind of fit, brought on by his intense anxiety on his master's behalf, and the horror of hearing that *his* evidence had gone against him.

The prisoner lifted his weary eyes as the sound reached him, and an expression of dismay crossed his face; it faded, however, as the judge took up the thread of his discourse, and went on to address the jury. They had, he said, a task of no ordinary magnitude before them—a task which seemed almost beyond the power of human skill to undertake, with any degree of certainty or equity of judgment. His lordship bade them weigh well their verdict—for it rested with them to determine whether the facts which had been brought before them, justified them in pronounc-

ing a verdict of " guilty " upon the prisoner. In consideration of the latter's youth and high standing in society, his lordship trusted that the law would be lenient ; but, at the same time, there could be no doubt as to the enormity of the crime of which he was accused, and for which, if he were guilty, a higher hand than that of earth would hold him responsible.

The judge gave a long searching look at the prisoner as he uttered these words, but as he encountered the fearless glance of the blue eyes, noted the proud up-lifting of the weary head, his sternness changed to pity. He thought of his own sons, and of one, his best beloved, now far away fighting for his Queen and country, beneath an African sun. The old judge felt a lump rising in his throat—he coughed, blew his nose, and then, resuming with an effort his ordinary manner, brought his harangue to a close by a short charge to the jury, delivered in a solemn tone of more than usual earnestness.

A deep, death-like stillness reigned in the court after the departure of the jury. Now and then an occasional sob might be heard proceed-

ing from some woman among the crowd, whom pity for the handsome prisoner at the bar, had moved beyond the power of concealing her emotion. Sir Randolph sat pale and haggard, his hands clasped together on his knees, his whole bearing that of a man whom misfortune had bereft of all he held dear. Lady Macgregor and her daughter sat near him, their eyes fixed on the son and brother whom they idolized.

And *he*, the prisoner, accused before his fellow-men of the blackest crime, arraigned before a judge and jury for murder of his friend, what were *his* feelings during these minutes of awful suspense? He sat in his old position, his arms folded upon his breast, his head bent down, and his eyes fixed upon the ground—only an occasional uncrossing of his legs, or a slight start, when any unusual sound broke the stillness, gave evidence that he was aware of what was passing around him.

The minutes passed away, a quarter of an hour, half an hour, three quarters of an hour, and still the jury did not appear. The judge had not yet returned to his seat, the counsel conversed in whispers with acquaintances on the bench, re-

porters in the gallery ceased their rapid writing and absorbed attention to their papers, and relieved their feelings by an interchange of ideas. Murmurs of conversation rose above the stillness which had reigned, and the timid ventured to ask the brave what they thought would be the result of the trial. The brave replied by emphatic shakes of the head, and a pantomimic show, indicative of the coming fate of the prisoner. Still the jury returned not.

An hour had passed away. The bench were evidently getting anxious. Not a few of those present seemed to wear upon their faces a look of supercilious boredom, as who should say—

“What a time to take about a matter upon which *we* could have given a verdict in five minutes !”

At last, amid a hush that was almost painful in its intensity, the jury came back, and the result of their long deliberation was given in the hearing of an eager, breathless crowd—

“*Not Guilty !*”

For some moments the silence in the court continued. Then a varied tumult of cheers and

hisses broke the spell which seemed to be upon all, and the "Great Grayling Murder Case" was at an end.

Yes, at an end. A nine day's wonder, which in the approaching days of greater and more startling events would soon be forgotten by the world at large.

To the prisoner himself the verdict sounded with no victorious ring of freedom. It bore with it the sound of the unsatisfactory and damning antidote to a stainless acquittal, "Not proven." Upon him, who had suffered, the innocent for the guilty, would the brand remain, never to be effaced till the dead and he should meet face to face, and the true murderer acknowledge his guilt at the tribunal of an avenging, all-merciful God.

## CHAPTER XIV.

“WE’LL TAK’ A CUP O’ KINDNESS YET.”

THE suggestion came from the Colonel himself, and if any suspicion had ever entered the minds of his fellow men as to his feelings towards Bertie Macgregor, those suspicions were now set at rest. For the Colonel was by no means “hail fellow well met” with every one—his friends were not numerous, his intimates very few indeed, and, therefore, when he did condescend to notice any man in the regiment particularly, that man was bound to feel himself highly honoured.

At the mess-table on the day after the acquittal of Captain Macgregor, Colonel Delorme had not a little startled the whole community there assembled, by rising from his chair and stating that he had a few words to address to them.

“He’s going to be married,” said young Blithers to his brother subaltern, Charlie Thornton, “and he’s going to break it to us gently—what a lark !”

“Then she’ll be a widow to a certainty,” replied the other, in the same low under-tone.

“And a regular tartar into the bargain,” added Blithers, chuckling with boyish delight at the idea of his chief being in such a predicament.

Colonel Delorme began his speech with a certain hesitation and nervousness of manner, as though not quite certain how his words would be taken by his hearers, causing astonishment and wonder to reign in no ordinary degree in the minds of his brother officers. After a few preliminary remarks as to the pleasure it gave him to see every place at the table occupied, and to note the general unity and concord which seemed to exist among those present, a friendly feeling which he trusted would always be maintained among men who were leagued together to defend their Queen and country, and to preserve peace and concord throughout the land, the Colonel went on to say—

“I am quite sure that I am speaking for everyone here to-night when I say with what sincere gladness I have to-day seen the intelligence of the acquittal of our old and esteemed brother officer and comrade Bertie Macgregor”—he paused.

A loud cheer and rapping of knuckles upon the table interrupted the silence which had reigned while he was speaking.

“I think,” went on the Colonel, when the applause had ceased, “that I am also speaking for everyone when I say that there could never have been any doubt as to his innocence.” Again came the rapping and cheers, but not quite so loud as before—some at the table even maintained an absolute silence. The Colonel noticed it. “I repeat that there could have been no doubt that the whole thing was either a case of mistaken identity, or a blunder from beginning to end. I am sure that nobody who knew Bertie Macgregor could believe him capable of the crime of murder, for a more good-tempered, easy-going fellow there never existed.” (Cries of “hear, hear,” and thunders of applause.) “I cannot tell you how much it grieves me to see the vacant place which he used to occupy so well, the life and soul of the mess-table, and to miss his cheerful voice and genial smile, and all those endearing qualities which made him such a favourite with us all.”

Colonel Delorme’s voice shook a little—he seemed more moved than he would have liked to own.

“I shall weep in a minute,” whispered Blithers the irresistible, drawing out his handkerchief with an elaborate flourish.

“His determination to leave the regiment,” went on the Colonel, after a pause, “was a great mistake, *I* think; but, of course, that is his own look-out. As far as I am concerned, I can only lament deeply the loss of so gallant and conscientious an officer, and one whom I would have trusted before any one in the world. However, it is not of his worth I intended so much to speak, as of a project which I think it our duty to consider and act upon. I propose that we shall give a farewell dinner to our old comrade, here, in this very room, where he has so often enlivened us by his untiring wit and genial conversation, and that we shall on that occasion present him with some token of our esteem and regard, and the regret we feel at losing him from among us. Before I sit down, gentlemen,” continued the Colonel, when he could speak, the *furore* of

applause being almost deafening, “I have one concluding remark to make. Any one here who in any way dissents from what I have said, or does not feel justified in joining in our expressions of regard to our old friend, is at liberty to absent himself from all share either in the presentation or the festivities consequent upon the occasion.”

Colonel Delorme sat down, amid more and prolonged applause, with a feeling that he had distinguished himself in no mean manner.

“He’ll come to the ‘widder’ yet,” said Blithers, who was rather disappointed. “He won’t take long either, now he’s begun the sentimental dodge.”

Major Ponsonby rose and seconded the Colonel’s proposition, which was carried by a show of hands then and there, and after a long and excited discussion as to the proper sort of thing to be presented as a token of their regard and esteem, it was decided that the offering should take the form of a diamond ring.

“If he is going travelling about, a piece of plate will be no earthly use to him,” said Major Ponsonby, when the suggestion of a silver dinner service,

or gold centre-piece had been made by some of his brother officers. “A ring, now, he can always wear, and it will serve to remind him not now and then only, but every minute and hour of the day, that his regiment believed in his integrity and innocence, and were sorry from their hearts to lose him.”

To say that Bertie Macgregor was astonished when the invitation came to him to dine at Aldershot with the officers of his old regiment, was to give a very faint idea of his feelings. His first impulse was to refuse. He was in no humour to mix once more with his former comrades, to take his usual place among them. He had done with all his old associates, and the wrench had been so hard, so bitter, that he felt he could not go through it again. Besides, in the sight of his fellow-men, he was still under suspicion—the awful sentence “not proven” was still hanging over his head, he felt its fatal influence wherever he went.

He had no hope that his character could ever be cleared, that he would be able to hold up his head as he had done, in conscious honour and in-

tegrity among his fellow-men. He must go forth to begin again the battle of life, where his story was unknown, where no finger could point at him as the man who was accused of murder, where none would shun his society, as his fellow-countrymen must do. And above all he must never meet *her* again. Those clear blue eyes which had last looked at him through a mist of tears, whose glamour was upon him even now, must never look upon him in loathing and disgust, in the righteous horror which she must feel for him who had brought so much unhappiness upon her sister. For Bertie had heard of poor Janet's dangerous illness at the Earl's place at Yorrowminster, and it had added not a little to his burden of grief and shame.

Love is blind they say, otherwise surely the mantle of nobleness, gentleness, and every other virtue with which in his heart Bertie clothed his idol, must have stood in some danger of being torn to shreds after all that had been told him of her coldness, her worldliness, and pride, a specimen of which he had himself been made the victim of in her rejection of his love for what she cared for more, wealth and a coronet.

Through the influence of several valued friends of his father’s, who believed in the young officer, and were sorry for him, Bertie had been offered the post of secretary to the brother of one of them, who was the British Consul at Venice, and Macgregor, after some little show of hesitation, finally accepted it—having merely stipulated that his real name should not be made known to his future employer, as he intended forthwith to adopt that of his mother’s family.

“ The Trehernes won’t be flattered I daresay at my taking their name,” he had remarked to Lady Macgregor, with a laugh that sounded strangely bitter to his mother’s ears—she had never heard his voice so sad and stern, nor seen the fair sunny face wear so pitiable an expression of weariness and gloom as at present, and her gentle heart ached for her only and idolized son.

“ They ought to be honoured, my boy, for you will do it credit,” she replied, fondly; but he only shook his head and turned sadly away.

“ I shall write and refuse,” he said to himself, as he stood at the window of his chambers in Clarges Street, and turned the card of invitation

from his former brother officers, absently round and round in his fingers. "What could have induced the fellows to ask me? They can't care to sully their company even for one evening by the presence of such a 'neer-do-weel,' as the world considers me; even Sharlcote cut me to-day on the very steps of the club, though I've lent him many a pony and saved the fellow's worthless life into the bargain. To think of the Colonel, too, of all fellows, heading the list. Hang me if I know what to do—it seems ungrateful to refuse, looks as if I really had killed poor Raynor, and was ashamed to face all these fellows. Wouldn't poor John have stuck to me through thick and thin if he had been alive! Shall I accept? By Jove," with a sigh, "sometimes I think I'll go and take a flying leap over the Embankment into the clutches of friendly old Father Thames; *he*, at least, would welcome me with open arms." A dreary smile accompanied the impromptu joke. "I think I shall toss up—heads I accept—tails I refuse. I'd rather not go, and yet—well here goes"—

He took a piece of money from his pocket,

looked at it doubtfully, then “flicked” it up in the air.

“*Heads!*” he cried, excitedly, at the top of his voice, as it came down again. “Now I must”—

“Yes, sir! Did you call, sir?”

Macgregor started at the sound of his servant’s voice at the door, and flushed rather guiltily.

“Yes, bring me some soda water, Hedges, and get me Bradshaw. The fellow would have thought I had gone stark staring mad, if I hadn’t invented some excuse,” he murmured, half apologetically to himself, as Hedges withdrew.

So Bertie sent an acceptance of their invitation to the Colonel and officers of the —th, and made up his mind that this should be the very last time he would visit his old quarters, or look upon the faces of his former comrades again.

time he had occupied his place at the mess table  
—and as the—

Flowing cups pass swiftly round,  
With no allaying Thames,

he became almost his old self again.

Dinner over, the business of presenting the token of regard to their old messmate by the officers of his regiment began. Colonel Delorme, as spokesman for the rest, stood up, and in a few carefully chosen words, expressed his own and his brother officer's pleasure in seeing among them again, one for whom they had always entertained so high an esteem and affection. He went on to tell of their desire to give expression to that regard, and to the regret they felt at losing so good and able an officer, and so valued a friend, from among their midst—by presenting him with a small token of their unchanged and kindly feelings towards him. In his own name and that of every officer present, he begged Captain Macgregor's acceptance of a diamond ring, trusting that he would wear it as a token of the great esteem in which he had been held by them all ; and that whenever he looked upon it, he would give a kindly thought to

those who would always hold him as their revered friend and comrade.

Colonel Delorme then handed the ring to the astonished Macgregor, who had listened to the speech and its various rapturous interruptions with feelings impossible to describe. He looked at the handsome present which lay in his hand with eyes that were misty, and a heart swelling with deep emotion. Then he suddenly rose, and placing the ring upon his finger, looked round the table, then in a voice that trembled a little in spite of himself, said—

“Colonel Delorme, Gentlemen,—I do not know how to express my sincere and heartfelt thanks for the honour you have done me. It has been no small trial to me to feel that I sit here among you for the last time ; that I shall never again head my gallant company, or join in the duties and pleasures of my old life in your midst. But with this cloud hanging over my head, I should have cast a slur upon the honour and nobility of the regiment in which my father served before me, and which has ever been noted for its high principles and integrity. My name is not yet

cleared. Till it be so, if such an event can ever happen, I shall leave England, and all former associations, and go where none will know of my misfortune, and the stigma attached to my hitherto unsullied name. The thought of your kind feelings towards me, of your belief in my innocence of the crime imputed to me, will ever be a pleasant and happy remembrance to carry with me in the days to come. My dear and valued friends, from my heart I thank you for your kindly thought of me, and the most magnificent way in which you have expressed those feelings."

He glanced at the ring on his finger, whose large diamond, set in a broad band of gold, flashed and sparkled in the lamp-light. Inside was an inscription, "Presented as a mark of esteem by the officers of the —th Regt. Highlanders," and the date.

"I promise you I shall always wear what will remind me so forcibly of the friends I have left behind me in dear old England, and of the happy days spent with them in the service of my country. I shall value this token of your goodwill towards me above every earthly possession."

There was loud cheering as Macgregor stopped, rather overcome by his feelings. Then they crowded round him, and he shook hands heartily with each, expressing individually his thanks and gratification.

But a new surprise awaited him. Major Ponsonby called for attention to a few words which he wished to say; and when silence was with some difficulty restored, he began a short speech.

He said that the men who had served under Captain Macgregor, having heard that the officers intended to present him with a token of their regard, were desirous of doing the same, and had clubbed together, for the purpose of making him some little parting present. They would like to give it to their former Captain themselves; and therefore he was requested to invite Captain Macgregor to meet them, after dinner was over, in the orderly-room, there to receive their humble offering.

Thither, therefore, an hour later, the whole company repaired, and found the men patiently waiting, standing in silence "at attention," an expectant look upon their solemn faces.

The testimonial, a handsome bronze clock,

chosen by the men themselves, and bearing an appropriate inscription, was then presented by the sergeant, who, in the name of the company, addressed a few words, expressive of their regret at losing so good a captain, and their good wishes for his future welfare.

Poor Bertie was by this time quite bewildered by the overpowering sensations which filled his mind. To know that we are held in high estimation by those whose good opinion we value, is above all things gratifying to us; and more especially so, when we have reason to fear that this good opinion may have been changed, as in the case of Captain Macgregor, by suspicion or righteous abhorrence of a crime of which, though innocent, we have been accused. Poor Macgregor felt that further speech would fail him if he attempted to address the company collectively. He therefore said what he had to say to each man individually, and as he shook them heartily by the hand, expressed his gratitude for their kind wishes and the present which he should so much value, in tones which had assumed all their genial warmth.

The men set up a cheer which echoed to the very roof itself. “Three times three” was given with such vigour, that Bertie at last threatened to turn and flee if they kept up any longer.

Then he and the officers returned to the mess-room, and at the close of the evening, sang for the last time with their old comrade, hands joining hands round the table, according to the ancient custom, the old and well-known refrain—

“We'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet, for Auld Lang Syne !”

## CHAPTER XVI.

### MEA CULPA.

JANET's illness having considerably delayed the departure of the Earl and Countess Sylvestre from England, it was now resolved that their foreign tour should be postponed until after the London season was over, it being necessary that Lord Sylvestre should be in town for the assembling of Parliament, which was expected to meet early that year. Gwendoline was to be presented on her marriage by a noble Duchess, and declared her intention of having Janet with her, should the latter be well enough to undertake the round of gaiety and late hours, consequent upon the occasion.

Mrs. Mervyn was well pleased at the arrangement which gave her an opportunity of introducing Auriol and Mildred a year sooner than would otherwise have been the case. Lady Denison, balked of her prerogatives with regard to Janet, was only too glad to take the twins under her

august wing ; and her hopes ran high of finding them suitable husbands with rank and wealth, and handing her own name down to posterity as a perfect queen of chaperones.

To Auriol and Mildred themselves the idea of a season in town was bliss personified. They would have Gwendoline and Janet there too—a delightful *contretemps* to the rather shy maidens—and their sorrow for John Raynor's death seemed gradually to evaporate before the brilliant prospects opening before them. Only when they looked upon Janet's pale, suffering face, and the little short rings of soft brown hair, which were all that remained of her once luxuriant tresses, did recollection come upon them in full force; and they confided to each other in secret that there certainly *was* a great drawback to their pleasure, and that they *almost* wished they were not going at all !

Nobody but Mrs. Mervyn herself entertained the slightest hope that Janet would be strong enough to take her place in the whirl of gay society. The girl only shook her head when the subject was mentioned, and smiled a dreary little smile over

the outspoken raptures of the twins at the prospect of the coming gaieties.

Another circumstance, which greatly enhanced the pleasure of the two girls, was the discovery that Constance and Mabel Leslie were also going to swell the multitude of rival beauties in the great world of society. The uncle who was their guardian, and whom Olive disliked, had become a Member of Parliament ; and having no daughters of his own, had suggested to his wife that she should offer to introduce his nieces, who, being "nice-looking girls, with lots of money," as he tersely put it, might help to aggrandize the family by a good marriage. Mrs. Clifton Bailey readily assented, even going so far as to make a perigrination to Deerham to speak to Olive in person, and gain her consent to the project—a task made the more easy by the manifest delight of Constance and Mabel themselves, and a gentle reminder from Mrs. Bailey that such an opportunity for the children to see the world might not offer itself often ; and that it was rather a pity for two such pretty girls to be secluded all their lives in a country village. Olive at last yielded.

She and Phyllis would not go, though good-natured Mrs. Bailey would fain have had all four as her guests in the great mansion in Piccadilly, which Clifton Bailey, Esq., M.P., had thought fit to take for the season; and which his ambition led him to hope would be one of *the houses of resort for rank and fashion* during the stay of himself and his wife in town.

“Phyllis and I will stay and take care of the fowls, ducks, pigeons, doves, dogs, and all the rest of the live stock, while the “little girls” add lustre to our name by making grand conquests in London. I only hope their gaieties will not spoil them, and make them dissatisfied with their country home,” Olive said, laughing, after a long discussion upon the all-important topic, and many entreaties that she and Phyllis would go too.

“I shall have to begin practising my curtseys if Royalty is going to see me,” said Connie, going up to a tall mirror, which stood between the windows in the morning-room, and surveying her *petite, graceful* form somewhat ruefully.

“No, my dear; you’re not much to look at, *certainly*”—nodding derisively at her reflection—

“and, therefore, everything will depend upon the style of your gown, and the grace of your movements”—here she made a deep and reverential curtsey—“What do you think of that, girls?” anxiously.

“Elegant is no word for it. Con, I predict for you nothing less than a ducal coronet!” cried Phyllis, clasping her hands in mock rapture.

“No *too* pleased, dear Phyllis, or I shall have to believe you capable of the inane and vulgar desire to be satirical,” replied Constance, still continuing her salaams before the glass.

“You forget, Connie, that it is easy enough to make curtseys in a short frock and with nobody looking on, but just think of the queen and the princesses, the dukes and duchesses, and all those grandes who will be watching you, and the train, yards long, which you have to avoid tumbling over,” said Mabel, dubiously.

Connie looked rueful for a moment.

“We must try another plan,” reflectively. “I know. Mab, we will go into the picture gallery and practise. You shall be the queen, and all those pictures of the Pendlebury lords and ladies

shall be the court. I shall pass and repass to kiss your hand, and bow myself from your presence in the most approved fashion, and then when I am perfect we can change about. Come along and begin at once ! ”

Christmas had passed sadly enough for the inmates of Abbott's Home and Grayling Hall. Lord and Lady Sylvestre had invited the whole party to Borehampton, but Mr. Mervyn would not leave home, he had a superstition that evil would befall him, if he did not sit under his own mahogany upon Christmas Day, and his wife returned from the castle to keep him company, Janet being pronounced convalescent.

The second week in January found the Hall once more shut up and deserted. Lady Macgregor and her daughter established themselves at Ventnor, while Sir Randolph—who, since his son's acquittal, had regained something of his old health and spirits, and had more than half forgiven that son the public scandal he had caused—was now located in London at Captain Macgregor's chambers, to spend with him the last few days of the latter's stay in England.

The mark of respect paid to his boy by the regiment in which he himself had been an honoured commander, had gratified the pride of the old baronet in no small degree. It did more than that, it made him think less harshly of his son, and to consider why, if such men as the Colonel and Major Ponsonby, to say nothing of the other men of rank and noble descent among the officers believed him innocent, should *he*, his father, be the last to do him justice ?

“Bertie, my boy,” he said, one day, when they sat together over their wine after dinner, and smoked the pipe of peace, “do you know, I’m not sure I haven’t been a fool after all”—

“Ah? in what way?” Bertie rejoined absently, as he took his cigar from his lips, and withdrew his eyes from their contemplation of the little rings of smoke he was blowing into the air to fix them on his father’s face.

“Well, you see, I believed you guilty, and”—

“What new idea have you got on the subject?”

Sir Randolph fidgeted and looked at his son.

“Well, after all, do you know, I now feel quite certain you never did it—shake hands.”

Macgregor took the outstretched palm, a smile of half contemptuous amusement curling his lip.

“I wouldn’t be too sure if I were you, sir,” he said, slowly.

“But I *am* sure—quite sure.”

“Glad to hear it,” was the calm reply, but Bertie’s eyes wandered somewhat sadly to the ring on his finger.

*There*, he knew, lay the secret of his father’s sudden change towards him.

Soon after the New Year, Gwendoline and her husband brought Janet back to Abbott’s Home, though still an invalid. The girl seemed to be regaining strength day by day, more quickly than her doctors had dared to hope, and her mother felt that she could once more breathe freely. It was at this time that the London visit was proposed, and arrangements made by which the three girls should together enjoy the benefit of the season.

“It will soon restore dear Janet to health,” wrote Lady Denizen, in answer to her sister’s letter, asking her to take charge of Auriol and Mildred, “and if Gwendoline only gives her the same chance she had herself, who knows what

may happen? I will do my best by Auriol and Mildred you may be sure, the former is so like-dear Gwendoline, she will be sure to 'take,' and I should not wonder if that clever young Marquis of Dimsdale improves his former acquaintance with Janet, who, if she plays her cards well, may secure as high a position in society as her elder sister. It is, as you say, most fortunate that things have turned out so well. The murder will be a nine days wonder, and the young man got off so nicely. The Macgregors do not come to London this year on account of this affair, and they are wise, I am sure. We are going to stay with the Clifton Baileys at Mar-sham Park, till we return to town for the season. I hear two of the Leslie girls are to be introduced, a very good thing for them, &c., &c."

"Gwen," said Janet one morning, as they sat together in the drawing-room at Abbott's Home, "are you quite happy now?"

Lady Sylvestre looked up at the sudden question, a startled flush rising in her cheeks.

"Why do you ask?" she said, slowly, "don't I *look* happy?"

"Not always, and I cannot help wondering how it is, with such a man as Robert for a husband," Janet replied, gazing dreamily into the fire.

Lady Sylvestre spread out the piece of satin upon which she was embroidering a spray of myrtle, the badge of her husband's family, upon her knee, and looked at it reflectively.

"If I had married for love it would have been different," she said, almost as though she were talking to herself.

Janet looked at her in wonder.

"But, Gwen, surely you must love him now that you are his wife?" she said, questioningly.

Gwendoline laughed ironically.

"I don't see that it follows at all," she said. "Robert knew when I married him that I did so for his title and wealth; it is scarcely likely I should change all of a sudden and adore him, especially when"—she stopped short, a little gasping sob escaping her lips.

"Did you ever tell him, Gwen, about—about Captain Macgregor?" asked Janet, in a low voice.

"No, certainly not, why should I?" was the

answer, but Gwendoline did not look at her sister, she found the matching of a shade in her silks a matter of apparently all-engrossing importance. “I don’t think if—if I had married John,” Janet’s hazel eyes grew dim with tears, “I should have liked to have kept anything from him.”

“That was different, you never cared for anyone else; if you had—”

“I should have told him all the same, there can be no happiness where there are secrets between husband and wife.”

Janet spoke almost vehemently, the colour rising in her pale cheeks. Once again Lady Sylvestre laughed the mocking laugh, which jarred so upon her sister’s feelings.

“You talk like an old married woman of sixty, Jan! besides that sort of idea is very old-fashioned, quite obsolete in fact. Not half the husbands in the world know anything of the true state of the girl’s affection, whom they have married, and *vice versa*. I daresay Robert had heaps of love affairs before he ever saw *me*, and what good would it do me to hear of them now?”

“No, I quite agree with you that in *his* case it

would be absurd, because I know he loves you so dearly, every other sentiment he ever felt for another woman, would be as nothing, but—" Janet hesitated, and looked at the calm, beautiful face, bent over the gorgeous piece of work in Gwendoline's hand ; at the glory of golden hair, and the white hands upon which the diamonds flashed and sparkled as she stitched away so diligently. "Gwen, are you sure you don't care for Captain Macgregor still ? "

There was no answer. Janet went on—

"Gwen, do you know when I was ill, and you were so kind to me, and took such loving care of me, I used to lie and think what I could ever do to repay you for all your goodness ; but I never came to any conclusion upon the matter, for there seemed nothing upon this earth that you wanted. You have all that money can buy, not a wish you ever express, but is instantly gratified. You have the whole deep love of a heart that beats for you alone ; what more could anyone wish for ? "

She paused. Lady Sylvestre had ceased her sewing, the work lay unheeded on her lap, and

with her cheek resting on her hand, she was gazing thoughtfully upon the ground.

“Then after a little, as I got better, I began to see that everything you had, wealth, title, and your husband’s love, were *not* all you wanted. I noticed your cold manner towards poor Robert, your avoidance of him, and the sad far-away look which came into your eyes, whenever you fancied yourself unobserved. I thought to myself, ‘I *can* do something for Gwen after all, I can try and make her *happy*.’”

Again Janet paused. Tears were stealing from Gwendoline’s drooped eyelids, and falling with a gentle patter upon the wreath of myrtle, to the decided detriment of the pale pink satin ground.

“You can never do that, Janet, I shall never be happy again—never!”

She hid her face in her hands and sobbed.

“But why not, Gwen? Dear sister, why not?”

“Because”—sob—“Oh, Janet! I love him still!”

There was silence, broken only by the deep sobs coming at intervals from behind Lady Sylvestre’s

pocket-handkerchief, and the sweet trills of Janet's canary in his cage by the window.

"Gwendoline, do you know I think you are very wicked?"

Lady Sylvestre looked up quickly, her tearful eyes wide open in astonishment.

"*Wicked?*" she said, slowly.

"Yes, wicked. Wicked to love another man when you have a good kind husband; wicked to think of him, to let any memory of him remain in your heart."

Janet spoke sternly. Gwendoline rose from her seat and crossed the room to her sister's couch, kneeling down before it.

"Janet," she said, "listen to me. I have tried, God only knows how hard, to drive away Bertie Macgregor's image from my thoughts. I have forced myself to think of Robert with the loving devotion of a wife, to be faithful and true to him; I thought I was going to succeed, and that in time the love for my husband would come. Then I heard of poor Bertie's trouble. I felt it was my fault—that I had driven him mad; and that in his madness he had done the deed which was imputed to

him. Day after day his name was brought before me ; I saw his face looking at me from every paper I took up. What could I do ? alas ! what *could* I do but love him still ? ”

She uttered the last words with passionate fervour, looking with tear-dimmed eyes at her sister.

Janet shook her head sadly.

“ It is wrong, Gwen ; I am sure it is wrong. You ought never to have married Robert with this love for another man in your heart. If he knew it, it would kill him.”

“ But he will never know it,” Lady Sylvestre said, lifting her handkerchief to her eyes. “ I am sure I try to be a good wife to him ; he has no cause to complain. If I cannot love him, I cannot ! ” pettishly.

“ Gwen, I am sure you could if you tried. You have married him of your own free will, you chose him before all the world ; and by doing so, you owe him all the love and devotion you can give him. And he is most deserving of it all, I am sure.”

“ Yes, that is the misery of it. If he were only

cold and indifferent we should get on so much better ; but he *will* try to make me love him, and I *cannot* ! ”

“ We have been very unfortunate, Gwen, you and I,” Janet said, after a pause, as she laid her hand on her sister’s. “ *You* loved poor Captain Macgregor and *I* loved John ; and now we are both left, as it were, alone. I know mamma expects me to make a grand marriage, as you have done ; but I have no ambition, and—I shall never ” with a little sob—“ forget Jack ! ”

“ It was partly mamma’s fault that I married Robert,” began Gwendoline, musingly. “ If she had not always harped so upon wealth and position, I should never”—

“ Miss Leslie.”

Lady Sylvestre rose hastily from her knees as the solemn tones of Thomas came from the door.

Well might society have been proud of its queen as she came to greet the visitor, not a trace of emotion visible in the calm, beautiful face, where smiles now took the place of the sobs which but a few minutes ago had seemed to rend her heart in twain.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### ON THE “CALAIS-DOUVRES.”

THE ponderous channel boat was steaming slowly away from the pier-head, leaving the white cliffs of Dover behind her as she ploughed her way through the leaden waters, whose dark foam-crested billows leaped up on each side, splashing the deck, and covering the unwary passengers with their salt spray.

Overhead the sky was covered with dark, lowering clouds, which now gathered thick together and descended in a pelting shower of rain and hail, now burst asunder to allow a brief glimpse of the kindly sun to light up the gloomy scene.

Upon the deck of the “Calais-Douvres,” somewhat apart from the other passengers, who were all huddled together out of the way of the cold, biting wind, stood a gentleman, tall and soldierly, clad from head to foot in a great rough ulster, the hood of which was drawn like a cowl over his head. He was gazing intently through a pair of

field glasses towards the receding shore, and seemed impervious to the frequent showers, the keen, cold wind, or the incessant rolling of the boat. He kept the glasses glued, as it were, to his eyes; indeed, he had never once removed them since the boat started, standing in the same position, fixed and immovable.

Over the water had come, but a while ago, the strains of the "Dreamland" waltz, played by an enterprising German band upon the end of the Admiralty Pier—perhaps in honour of the departing passengers, or in the hope of gaining a passing gratuity from the friends and relations who had watched the boat set off; and whose hearts, wrung by sorrow at the parting, would be more full of pity and commiseration for the blue noses and cold fingers of the enterprising musicians.

Sad were the eyes which were taking their farewell look at old England; sadder still the thoughts which passed through the heart of the gazer upon the white cliffs and long line of fast disappearing coast; while the sweet strains (to which distance certainly lent enchantment, for the band near to

was simply horrible to listen to, so out of tune (were the instruments) took his thoughts back to a time he would fain have forgotten, and caused a groan of anguish to escape his lips.

The coast at last became invisible, even with the aid of the field-glasses, and suddenly lowering them, the gentleman turned away and began a somewhat critical survey of his fellow-passengers. The boat was certainly crowded, an unusual occurrence for the time of year, but the persons who had remained on deck were mostly foreigners, broad-faced Germans, enveloped in a cloud of tobacco smoke, and sleek-looking Frenchmen of the shopkeeper class. One or two grim-looking ladies, evidently keepers of "pensions" where young English girls could "acquire a foreign education with the benefits of a good home," were among the exceptions. They had evidently been visiting England to collect pupils, for they were accompanied by several "demoiselles" of the regular school-girl type, long limbed and awkward, who indulged in sundry nudges and giggles, varied by irrepressible paroxysms of tears whenever the thought of the recent parting from their home

circle came across their minds. There were also one or two Jesuit priests, and the usual sprinkling of "horsey" looking men of the "Tom and 'Arry" type, always to be found among English passengers by sea or land.

Bertie Macgregor let his eyes wander over the motley crowd, a half-contemptuous, half-amused look crossing his handsome face. It vanished, however, as his glance fell upon a figure standing by the rails surrounding the entrance to the saloon cabin. The man had his back turned towards him, yet surely Macgregor knew the tall, rather bent form, and the peculiar brigandish look of the large slouched hat. A long military-looking cloak enveloped him, giving to his appearance an air of mysterious dignity, remarkably awe-inspiring and attractive.

"Robertson," he murmured, "by all that's wonderful! What in the world can he be doing here?"

Scarcely had the exclamation passed his lips when the individual suddenly turned, and leaving his post, began to make his way towards where Bertie Macgregor had taken up his stand. It was not a dignified progress by any means; in fact, it

resembled rather the ungainly attempts of a tipsy actor to tread gracefully the boards in the most thrilling scene of a sensational drama ; and were it not for his dislike and aversion towards the Grayling schoolmaster, Bertie could have found it in his heart to roar outright with laughter as he approached.

Mr. Robertson came straight up to Captain Macgregor, but apparently without recognizing him, for the latter had turned his back, and the cowl hood effectually concealed his features.

The schoolmaster took a seat near the grimmest of the grim schoolmistresses, and drawing a newspaper from his pocket, began to read. His handsome dark face, and brigandish-looking attire, made a great impression upon the susceptibilities of the young ladies by whom the prim preceptress was accompanied ; they began to whisper and nudge each other, and finally to giggle—having repeatedly to be called to order by the frowns of the Fraulein.

“ May I offer you the paper ? ” said Robertson, at length, turning courteously to the German lady, and holding it towards her as he spoke.

"I thank you," was the response in English but with a decidedly foreign accent, "but ze storm is so vary strong just now, I could not see ze lettares ; and zis boat it do roll terrible !"

"Yes, we are having a rough passage across, certainly," returned Robertson, folding up the rejected newspaper, and returning it to his pocket, "and there is really no news worth reading just now."

"So ?" interrogatively. "Zere was ze great murder a leetle while ago; I have been vary interested in zat. I hef been to ze Isle of Wight just now, for to fetch my pupils ; and I hef great admiration for zat part of your England—wunderschön ! beautiful !"

"Yes, it is pretty there," he acquiesced, quietly.

"I hef read all ze accounts of ze trial, and I hef been frightfully horrified to see zey hef let him go, ze prisoner, *unverschämter kerl!* "

She drew up her head disdainfully.

"But, madame, if he was innocent, they were obliged to let him off," the schoolmaster said, looking at her keenly.

“But zey did not try to find out ; zey were too *quick!*” decisively.

“Pardon, madame ; an English judge and jury are seldom accused of that. They”—

“Often make mistakes when the prisoner happens to be an officer, and heir to a baronetcy,” put in a voice near them.

Captain Macgregor turned hastily round. The speaker was one of the Jesuit priests whom he had before noticed. Bertie turned away again, the colour mounting hotly to his cheeks. The speaker went on.

“I have watched this trial with great interest, the more so as I know something of the parties concerned”—Macgregor started—“and I firmly believe Macgregor to have been guilty.

“Upon what grounds ?” Robertson asked, quickly.

“Upon the ground of circumstances. What clearer proofs could there have been than those brought against him ? And I repeat, had he been a poor, obscure wretch from among the scum of the earth, the jury would have found him guilty. Unfortunately, the Courts of Secret Enquiry and the

Star Chamber are things of the past. I say unfortunately, because putting criminals to the torture always seemed the only reliable method of getting them to confess."

"Those are strange sentiments, Father, to come from the lips of one holding your office," said Robertson; but though his tones were sarcastic, his face had grown pale and anxious. "Surely you would not have those ages of secret crime re-established?"

The Jesuit shrugged his shoulders.

"Secret justice, not crime, my son. But perhaps I merely spoke as a rigid upholder of equity in judgment—not as a priest of our Holy Church. Our religion teaches us mercy towards all men; but mercy is not always justice."

He turned away, and approached that end of the boat where Captain Macgregor stood. For some minutes he remained silently by his side.

"The weather seems to be clearing," he remarked, at length.

"Yes; I suppose we shall soon be across now," Bertie replied, pushing back his hood and facing the priest.

The latter started, and looked keenly at him ; then said, calmly—

“ May I borrow your glasses for a moment ? Thanks,” as the Captain handed them to him.

For some moments he scanned the distant French coast in silence, then put the glasses back into their owner’s hand.

“ I am so short-sighted,” he observed ; “ a drawback rather to my office.”

“ Yes ? ” said Bertie, interrogatively.

“ The boat is very crowded,” went on the priest. volubly ; “ rather a motley crew too—English, French, Germans, of all grades, and every type. One is led to wonder where they all come from, and what they have been doing in England. Are you a traveller, sir ? ”

“ Pretty well,” Bertie replied, carelessly. “ I have been nearly all over the world, I think.”

“ Then, of course, this sort of thing is rather a weariness of the flesh to you ; for my part, I enjoy it. This is only my second voyage across the Channel. I and my reverend brothers”—with a glance over his shoulder in the direction of the

other two priests—"have been over to England on a secret mission ; and are now returning to the Monastery of —, at Venice."

"You were interested in the Grayling murder case, I think you said?" Macgregor observed coolly, taking out his cigar-case.

Again the priest gave him a keen, searching look, ere he replied—

"Yes, I knew something of the parties concerned ; at least, the man who was murdered was at the time in correspondence with a Mr. Goldie, the godson of Lord Pendlebury ; you have heard of him ? "

"Yes ; I know Mr. Goldie too, very well."

"This Ralph Goldie," went on the priest, "served part of his noviciate at one time at the Convent, intending to embrace the Romish religion, and become a priest. He has since returned to the Protestant faith, much to our sorrow, for he was a favourite with the brotherhood. He is now in England, I believe, on a mission of like interest with my own. He is seeking one, Lewis Rolton, who lately absconded with certain monies belonging to the monastery, which Goldie held in

trust, and which Rolton (then his clerk) embezzled.  
He"—

"Yes, yes; I know. Goldie told me : in fact, I have been assisting in the search myself, having at one time, when Rolton served in my regiment, under the name of Burford, backed a bill for him to a large amount. When it came due he suddenly decamped, and I can gain no tidings of him."

"Neither can we. I expect the fellow has made off to America by this time."

"I saw Goldie about three months ago. He had gained some clue as to Rolton's having been in the Isle of Wight ; but he found it impossible, he said, to follow it up beyond a certain point. Whether he has since succeeded I do not know."

"Mr. Goldie undertook the post of almoner to the Convent, at the time when he was intending to join our church. It was then that Rolton became a kind of secretary to him."

"Yes; it was his pretence of being such an intimate friend of Goldie's which induced me to be such a fool as to lend him money. He made out that he was some connection, and that he and

Goldie had lived together in Venice ever since they first met, four or five years ago."

"Humph!" The priest shrugged his shoulders. "Rolton is a bad character altogether. He does not belong to our church, but I have heard a good deal of him. We priests hear some queer things in the confessional," reflectively.

"But it seems queer altogether"—Bertie began. The Jesuit interrupted him.

"Do not say any more just now," he said hurriedly, in a low tone; "we may be overheard, and I do not want this matter known. May I not hope to meet you again?"

"You may very probably see me in Venice. I am going there."

"I am very glad," the priest replied, warmly; "for, pardon me, but I have taken a fancy to you. You will not think me impertinent if I ask your name?"

"Herbert Treherne," was the calm reply. "And you"—

"Ask at the Convent of the Dominican Friars for Father Clement; you will always find me. I would have farther talk with you, my son, for

your looks tell me you are sad, and in need of consolation. Am I not right?"

"Partly."

Bertie smiled to himself. Would the priest be so cordial and confiding, he wondered, if he knew all about him; if he thought for one moment that he was the man whom he held to be guilty of the murder of his friend for whom he had suggested the torture, as the only means of wresting his confession of guilt from him?

"Ah, my son, would that such would join our Holy Church. There you would get the peace and heavenly consolation you need. No, I am not going to try and convert you," as Captain Macgregor half turned away; "that is not our mission. We leave you to find out the comforts of which we speak for yourself."

"Well, I too trust we shall meet again," Macgregor said, cordially, when, after a few more remarks on general subjects, the kind-hearted, but justice-loving priest held out his hand in farewell, saying he must join his brethren, as they were getting near land.

"A probable convert," muttered the Jesuit, as

he turned away. "But where *have* I seen his face before?"

"Captain Macgregor, I had no idea you were here. Will you allow me to congratulate you upon the successful issue of the trial?"

The voice behind him, speaking in low, courteous tones—those tones which he had last heard within the crowded court, speaking damning words of evidence against him—made Macgregor start. He answered coldly, without turning round—

"My name now and from henceforth is Mr. Trehern; and the issue of the trial is no matter of congratulation to me whatever."

"Cap—Mr Trehern, I beg your pardon; but surely you will not bear malice against me for the part I was obliged to take?"

There was something almost cringing in the earnest tones. Macgregor turned suddenly, and faced the speaker.

"No, Mr. Robertson, I do not bear malice. You were doubtless doing your best to serve the interests of justice when you tried to make the evidence against me look its worst. But why you should have considered it necessary to throw in the

vile inuendos you did, I cannot imagine, as I never injured you, or gave you cause to regard me as your enemy."

Captain Macgregor spoke calmly, but there was an ominous glitter in his blue eyes, which warned the schoolmaster that he was treading on dangerous ground.

" You are mistaken ; I never sought to injure you. I was obliged to say what I knew ; the cross-examination admitted of nothing less," he replied, rather sullenly.

" My good fellow, pray don't mistake me. You were quite at liberty to say what you liked of me ; only you can scarcely expect me to be possessed of the magnanimity and forbearance of a saint, and be 'hail fellow, well met' with you directly afterwards. I am only human after all ; and you must be aware that when a man knows himself to be innocent, he can see through all the dodges to get him convicted. I may be a fool in some things"—his thoughts reverting to the dishonoured bill—"but I can see through a brick wall as soon as anybody."

" I never believed you guilty for a moment,"

murmured Robertson hurriedly, his eyes falling before the clear blue ones regarding him so fearlessly and intently.

"Thanks," carelessly. "Unfortunately, your private opinion and open evidence did not coincide."

"I suppose you will not be friends because you think me beneath you," Robertson said, slowly.

"Nothing of the kind. Besides, you forget that whilst *you*, in the eyes of the world, are a respectable member of society, I am still a suspected felon. Under the circumstances, we are better apart."

He turned on his heel and sauntered away, leaving the schoolmaster white with rage and vexation.

END OF VOL. II.



